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Processes of Social Work Engagement with

The Reforming State in Australia:

The Case of Centrelink

This thesis is submitted in fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of Doctor of Social Work

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AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

This is to certify that:

I. this thesis comprises only my original work towards the Doctor of Social Work Degree

II. due acknowledgement has been made in the text to all other material used

III. the thesis does not exceed the word length for this degree.

IV. no part of this work has been used for the award of another degree.

V. this thesis meets the *University of Sydney's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) requirements for the conduct of research.*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis provides an account of processes of social work engagement with the reforming state in Australia. The empirical study for this thesis focuses on the embedding and intensification of 'activation' reforms into income support and employment services policy and the development through new public management (NPM) strategies of an individualised service delivery culture in the Australian federal government agency *Centrelink* during the period 1997 to the close of 2007. Central to this thesis is an interest in performative aspects of social work identity, as well as ways in which organisational control was pursued within this public service agency through intentional efforts to regulate the identity of its employees to ensure their responsiveness towards implementing contested policy reforms. The study operationalises and further develops a particular articulation of the theoretical framework of 'performativity' to explore processes of regulation focused at the level of the organisation as well as at the level of individual workers.

The empirical study informing this thesis analyses narratives from two sets of agents: politicians and former members of the Centrelink Executive, and eleven highly experienced Centrelink social workers from all levels of the hierarchy who participated in the transformation of this public service agency through the implementation of NPM and welfare reform processes. The focus of the study is on reflexive processes of coming into being, specifically how these two sets of agents interpreted and responded to interactive social and regulative processes of identity formation within this restructured organisational and policy context. The thesis extends current understandings of the *effect* of ubiquitous NPM reforms and welfare policy reforms on social workers through shedding light on the *processes* through which social workers become or are produced in particular organisational and policy contexts. This thesis provides rich insights into the way social work and public service values and commitments were constructed and contested throughout a period of transformational change.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to provide an account of processes of social work engagement with public management reform and welfare policy reform within the context of regulated organisational life. The core research question explored throughout this thesis is: how do social workers understand and respond to their changing organisational and policy context? The thesis situates this research question within a specific site of practice through a focus on a cohort of Australian social workers confronted by two significant and related changes: firstly, the embedding and intensification of 'activation' reforms into income support and employment services policy in Australia and secondly, the development of an individualised service delivery culture in the Australian federal public service agency *Centrelink* during the period 1997 to the close of 2007. The empirical study conducted for this thesis explores these intersecting shifts and how they were experienced and responded to by social workers who worked in Centrelink throughout a period of significant organisational change and welfare policy reform. The overarching theme of this research is the processes by which social workers *become* or are *produced* in response to new public management (NPM) reform and welfare policy reform.

Over a period of around thirty years, a parallel process of public management and welfare policy reform in Australia gave rise to new forms of public service governance, resulting in a potentially hostile environment for social work practice in public sector organisations. In the case of Centrelink, social workers were enjoined through various rewards and sanctions to adopt an enterprising stance towards their work in the administration of increasingly stringent and punitive welfare reform strategies. New performative regimes and related regulatory frameworks were introduced that had the potential to influence the way Centrelink social workers assessed their individual and professional value within a changing public service policy and practice environment. This thesis focuses on a public

service agency that was confronted with rapid organisational and policy changes in response to an Australian federal government agenda to replace old forms of public sector management with a new entrepreneurial ethos of service design and provision. The thesis explores the influence of emerging discourses, cultures and practices on the way social workers constructed and negotiated individual and professional identities within a public service workplace. The focus of the study is on reflexive processes of coming into being – how various agents within this sphere of practice interpreted and responded to regulative processes of identity formation within the workplace.

Central to this research is an interest in performative aspects of identity as well as ways in which control is pursued within workplaces through intentional efforts to regulate employees in order to ensure their responsiveness towards achieving contested organisational and policy reform objectives. The thesis proposes that the complex and multi-faceted concept of 'identity' has important consequences for the motivations, priorities and actions of social workers within a changing public service workplace because of the ambiguous nature of the social work project within state welfare institutions. To this end, the study explores strategies adopted by Centrelink social workers to engage with new organisational regimes in their daily negotiation of the micropolitics of their workplaces - the place 'where judgements are made and where the effects of power are felt' (Thomas and Davies, 2005b, p. 684).

The empirical study for this thesis explores material, discursive, social and personal aspects of organisational processes to analyse narratives from two sets of agents. The study analyses published and unpublished presentations by politicians, public service managers and former members of the Centrelink Executive that consist of narratives in the public arena about the creation of Centrelink as an identity and as a vehicle for the implementation of contested income support and employment service policies. The study also explores

transcripts of semi-structured interviews with Centrelink social workers at all levels of the national social work hierarchy who were active participants throughout the period under investigation in the transformation of this public service income support agency through the implementation of NPM and welfare reform processes. Research interviews elicited narratives from a cohort of social workers about the meanings they made of this experience for themselves as individuals, as members of the collective social work profession and as public servants employed by Centrelink.

The study explores the ways in which these two sets of agents interpreted and responded to interactive social and regulatory processes of identity formation within this restructured policy and organisational context. The thesis will argue that the concept of identity regulation had particular relevance to the corporatised public service context of Centrelink during the period 1997 to the end of 2007 because the organisation explicitly and strategically appropriated private sector management and marketing strategies at different times during this period in the process of establishing a new hybridised organisation to deliver federal government income support and employment services policy. The study is focused on the way these regulatory processes were understood and responded to by social workers at all levels of Centrelink as they attempted to balance organisational imperatives and welfare policy reforms with personal commitments and codified public service and professional values, ethics and commitments.

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. The framework for **Chapter One** developed out of a review of commentaries, published and unpublished government documents and scholarship across a range of disciplinary areas to provide an account of the evolution of the reforming state in Australia, leading up to and including the ten-year period under investigation for this study. Three key themes were identified as being important to the study. The first theme relates to transnational contextual matters and traces a trajectory of key trends in political,

social and economic conditions and their influence on institutional and welfare reform discourses. The second theme relates to the impact of these broad trends on institutional arrangements for the delivery of income support and employment services in Australia. The third theme explores ideas about the evolution of new organisational forms and discourses to support the implementation of welfare reform measures in Australia. This discussion provides a context for investigating how these changes impacted upon the expectations and work performances of public servants, including social workers, in the case study organisation Centrelink.

Chapter Two explores changing perceptions of the role, status and identities of professionals employed in public sector organisations confronted with what Stephen Ball (2003, p. 215) refers to as three interrelated policy technologies - marketisation, managerialism and performativity - set over and above older technologies of professionalism and bureaucracy. This chapter situates the empirical study within an ongoing debate about the future and legitimacy of social work within state welfare institutions. Chapter Two identifies what is left out of these accounts to develop a case for moving beyond the current focus on the completed *effects* of change on social workers, to exploring ways in which individual social workers negotiate *how to be* in their active engagement with these changes within specific sites of practice.

Chapter Three describes the approaches taken to investigating the two sets of agents' responses to organisational and welfare policy change during the period under investigation. The study focuses on the following themes within four transitional periods: the changing context of public service *organisational design* and social work practice in the income support and employment services field; the changing *value of public service*; changing *policy discourses* and their *interaction with service delivery*; and, the ways in which a nationally dispersed social work service within Centrelink engaged with this changing organisational and policy

landscape. The specific research questions informing the empirical study for this thesis are outlined at the conclusion of Chapter Three.

Chapter Four introduces the reader to the participants in the study and to the case study organisation Centrelink as a context of social work practice. Each of the frontline social workers had been employed in DSS/Centrelink for more than ten years at the time of the interview and so brought with them a long-term practice-based understanding of the changes they experienced. This chapter also contains a discussion about the evolution of social work practice in the field of income support in Australia as a context for later analysis of actions taken by social workers in their broad role as performers of policy, and in their specific role as implementers of contested organisational design changes and welfare policy reforms.

Chapter Five and **Chapter Six** present findings from an analysis of empirical material represented in a corpus of organisational texts and in the accounts of social workers who participated in the study. The social work participants were guided through different phases of organisational and policy change and asked about the sense they made of the changes and their practice responses to reforms throughout this ten-year period. Their responses provide rich and often surprising insights into the way social work and public service values and commitments were constructed and contested throughout this period.

Chapter Seven concludes the thesis by drawing together insights gained throughout the empirical study, and talks back to existing accounts of social work responses to organisational and policy change.

In broad terms, this thesis develops understandings about the rapidly changing context of practice for social workers in Australia. Specifically, the thesis extends

the terms of an ongoing debate within the social work profession about possibilities for articulating new forms of engaged social work practice within a transformed welfare state apparatus. The research seeks to move this debate beyond a broad analysis and critique of social work's future viability and social ethic to focus down on a detailed study of one organisational site where social workers have been required to negotiate fundamental practice and policy challenges on a daily basis. In doing so, this thesis seeks to contribute to broader understandings of the significance of workplace context in social work and human service practice.

CHAPTER ONE: An account of the reforming state in Australia

Introduction

Australia has been an active participant in a transnational diffusion of public sector management and welfare policy reform stretching back to the early 1970s and continuing to this day. The trajectory of this reform movement is well rehearsed in a body of literature that presents a backstory of a complex and dynamic interplay of global political, economic and social factors informing change agendas within individual nations. This chapter draws selectively from this body of scholarship to pinpoint specific forces that informed the Australian federal government approach to public sector management and welfare policy reform. The matrix of decisions taken over a period of more than 20 years culminated in the creation of the hybrid public service agency *Centrelink* – the field of study for this thesis and the context for theorising social work engagement with this intersecting reform agenda.

This chapter provides an account of a parallel process of Australian Government[1] public service governance and management reform and welfare policy reform in order to establish a context for the later exploration of processes in the production of social work identities within regulated organisational life. This discussion focuses on a period of recent history in which Australian Government public service delivery models and income support and employment services policy co-evolved within complex systems that reflected changes in the balance of relationships between various agents in the process. This changing balance of relationships gave form to new public sector governance models that had a

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[1] The term 'Australian Government' is used throughout this thesis reflecting a contemporary usage in official literature that has replaced the earlier designations 'Commonwealth Government' and 'Federal Government'. The original designation is used if found in direct quotes.

significant impact on the way income support and employment services were funded, delivered and evaluated within the Australian context. In the process, new performative regimes and related regulatory frameworks were implemented that had the potential to influence the way public servants, including social workers in Centrelink, viewed their roles, responsibilities and value.

Three key themes are considered important to this discussion. The first theme traces broad trends in political, economic and social conditions that influenced the development of NPM discourses and practices across political systems with similar guiding ideologies. The second theme focuses on broad trends in the construction of approaches to public management in Australia. The third theme explores the evolution of new discourses to support the implementation of welfare reform measures in Australia and how these changes impacted upon the design of *Centrelink* – an institution created to implement public service management and welfare reforms in Australia.

Co-evolving organisational and policy regimes

This study begins from an understanding that institutional arrangements for the delivery of human services evolve in time and place to give effect to social policy changes. This parallel and intersecting process of social policy and service delivery development reflects values, social norms and goals that are mediated by historical and political legacies (Dalton, Weeks, Draper and Wiseman, 1996; Fawcett, Goodwin, Meagher and Phillips, 2010). This process has given rise to governance models that have had a significant impact on the way human services are funded, delivered and evaluated, which in turn has arguably influenced the way human service workers perceive and express their agency and their value within government run or funded organisations.

There is a burgeoning literature on the transformation of welfare states across OECD countries. Nations develop social protection systems through compromise, contest and debates between various groups of policy actors at different historical moments (Dalton et al., 1996 p. 13). Through this contest, nations construct diverse responses to broadly similar problems. Jamie Peck (2001, p. 4) argues that policies are rarely transported *in toto* from one jurisdiction to another but rather evolve through what he terms 'path-dependent mutual adjustment'. Peck suggests that this mutually referential policy process is particularly strong amongst political systems with similar guiding ideologies. He outlines a process of transnational policy transfer that creates a template for reformers in other locations to draw upon to obtain inspiration and legitimacy when designing, implementing and defending policy directions. To illustrate this point, Peck argues that reform blueprints that have been inspired by neo-liberal guiding ideologies have found strong legitimacy within governments that are inspired by neo-liberal principles (Peck, 2001, p. 6).

Shaping public management reform across OECD countries

The multiple ends of public management reform

Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 7) define public management reform as, 'deliberate changes to the structures and processes of public sector organisations with the objective of getting them (in some way) to run better'. Mascarenhas (1993, p. 319) notes that the 1980s witnessed a renewed emphasis on public management reform in most developed countries. Mascarenhas identifies three key factors that influenced the public management reform agenda. The first of these was a significant growth in the number of public bureaucracies created to support post-Keynesian welfare states that came to be seen as increasingly complex and ineffective, leading to public disenchantment. Secondly, that there was a perception by international global financial institutions, credit rating agencies,

economists and politicians that the cost of funding public services was diverting resources to lesser productive purposes and crowding out the private sector. Thirdly, there was an emergence in the early 1980s of conservative governments in Britain and the United States, advancing the dominance and transmission of neo-liberal principles and practices across nations that were connected through processes of globalisation (Mascarenhas, 1993, p. 319).

In a comparative international review of public management reform, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 6) talk about the reform agenda having multiple ends. Ostensibly, reforms were about restraining public spending, lightening the burden of heavy-handed bureaucracy and reshaping social policies that were seen to be no longer affordable. According to Pollitt in an earlier study (Pollitt, 2003), public service provision was portrayed in rhetoric and in political discourse as bureaucratic, inherently inefficient, wasteful and unwilling to embrace change, with slow and cumbersome bureaucratic structures and processes. In Pollitt's evocative language, public service performance was conceptualised by its various detractors as 'like a dinosaur, too big, too slow-moving, too insensitive, insufficiently adaptable and seriously under powered as far as brains are concerned' (Pollitt, 2003, p. 32).

The rhetoric of reform, according to Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 6) pointed to economies in public expenditure; improving the quality and responsiveness of public services; making operations of government more efficient; increasing the chances that government policy would be implemented effectively, and lastly, freeing public officials from bureaucratic constraints which inhibited the opportunity to manage and enhance government accountability to the legislature and constituents for its policies and programmes. The authors also emphasise additional 'symbolic and legitimacy' benefits to governments that chose to embrace this reform agenda, including: being *seen* to be doing something dynamic and positive; winning regard through promises to reign in bureaucratic power and

inefficiencies; promoting flexible and positively framed management techniques and organisational cultures; gaining reputation by 'modernising' and 'streamlining' government activities, through using tax payers money responsibly, and making government seemingly more transparent. Of significance to the key focus of this study, Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p.6) argue that an intermediate end for public management reform is the strengthening of control by politicians over the bureaucracy. This point and its significance to social work in Centrelink will be revisited in more detail below when discussing the specific approaches taken to public management reform in Australia and again in later chapters when analysing organisational texts and social work participant interview responses.

A comparative international review of public management reform in twelve OECD nations by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2004, p. 18) concludes that there was no single template for reform across liberal democracies. The authors argue instead that the framework for change was shaped by the local preoccupations and priorities of politicians and various significant actors concerned. However, notwithstanding this assertion, it has been suggested by many commentators that a blueprint for contemporary institutional reform discourses can be traced back to the 'reinventing government' movement in the United States in the early 1990s (Parker and Bradley, 2000, p.131).

At around the same time, the notion of the 'enabling state' gained ascendancy in the United Kingdom as an alternative to the traditional notions of the 'providing' or 'welfare' state (Taylor, 2000, p. 372). The so-called enabling state incorporated change initiatives that began with the Thatcher Conservative government (beginning in 1979), notably: privatisation of state resources (enabling competition); contracting out of government services (enabling an internal market for public goods and services) and a range of strategies that reduced dependence on state support (Taylor, 2000, p.372). Taylor argues that the term 'enabling state' denoted something positive to many people: to enable is to empower and to

provide the ability to choose between options, therefore extending freedom for
both providers and users of services. According to Taylor, the 'providing state' in
contrast was represented in rhetoric as promoting the negative values of
compulsion and dependency (Taylor, 2000, p. 372).

New Public Management – privatisation and technologies of accounting

Christopher Hood (1995, p. 94) suggests that the term NPM was coined around
this time as a generic label for a general, 'though certainly not universal', shift in
public management styles. According to Hood, the basis of NPM reflected two
cardinal doctrines: lessening or removing differences between the public and the
private sector, and shifting the emphasis from process accountability towards a
greater element of accountability in terms of results (Hood, 1995, p. 94).
Technologies of accounting were seen to be a key element in this new conception
of public sector accountability, since it reflected high trust in the market and
private business methods and low trust in public servants and professionals whose
activities needed to be closely costed and evaluated by accounting techniques
(Hood, 1995, p. 94).

This thesis is concerned with the specific experience of welfare policy and public
service reform at the federal government level in Australia so the remainder of
this chapter will focus on Australian [federal] government public management
and welfare policy reforms rather than reform at the state, local government or
non-government sector levels. The emphasis of the following discussion is on key
aspects of Australian Public Service governance and management reforms since
the mid 1970s.

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Forces shaping public management reform at the federal level in Australia

Making the public service more responsive to government

While many of the drivers for global public sector management reform have been
traced back to the diffusion of neo-liberalism in the early 1980s and its expression
in NPM in the early 1990s, a number of Australian commentators go back further
to what was happening on the political and economic stage in Australia in the mid
1970s (Orchard, 1998; APSC, 2003; O'Neill and Moore, 2005; MacDermott,
2008). O'Neill and Moore (2005, p.24) argue that the specific form of public
management reform developed in Australia can be located in processes arising out
of the frustration of Gough Whitlam's Labor Government (1972-1975) with what
was perceived as the Australian Public Service's obstinacy in implementing its
social and economic programmes.

The Whitlam government established the Royal Commission on Australian
Government Administration (RCAGA) in 1974 - known as the *Coombs
Commission* - to conduct the first independent, wide-ranging inquiry into
Australian Government administration since 1918. The Commission concluded in
1976 that public service administration was unduly centralised and hierarchical,
and that 'better decisions will be made and better service given to people if
authority and responsibility are devolved to officials close to where the action
occurs' (APSC, 2003, p.35). The report asserted that public service management
had become rigid and excessively structured.

The RCAGA recommended a raft of effectiveness and efficiency reforms to the
Australian state apparatus that were implemented by successive governments with
contrasting ideologies, starting in earnest with the Hawke Labor Government in
1983 and continuing through to the Howard Coalition Government's intensive

NPM reforms commencing in 1996 (O'Neill and Moore, 2005). This reform agenda was carried out against a background of international economic pressures and stressed the need for a clear focus on objectives and assessing performance on the basis of results (APSC, 2003 p. 117). These reforms included: more accountability for public servants; mechanisms to improve the relationship between officials and the community; emphasis on managerial skills; more efficient and effective service delivery; devolution of responsibility to non-government actors as well as greater flexibility and diversity in organisational styles; more efficient and economical use of human resources, and a more open public service (all of the above drawn from Holland, 2003, cited in O'Neill and Moore, 2005 p. 22). In summary, these reforms provided some of the rationale for reforming the public sector in a more managerialist, market-like direction.

The marketised, corporatised, contestable and enterprising public service in Australia

A turn to marketisation

Approaches to organising and providing government services in Australia have been radically transformed over the past three decades at both federal and state levels. Traditional bureaucratic models of organisation were replaced to a large extent by a mixed economy of service delivery models (Considine, 1996) that were built on alternative accounts of public governance. A legacy of tension between the political and the administrative arms of government generated a climate in which all levels of Australian government were primed to draw upon the momentum of reforms emanating from the United States and the United Kingdom. Considine (1996, p. 77) describes a reform agenda that intensified in the mid-1990s as a 'new order of things' whereby state and federal governments in Australia embarked on a process of institutional change that built upon earlier restructuring trends in corporate management such as strategic and business

planning processes. Considine (1996, p. 78) charts the emergence of the marketisation approach within government which he argues was adopted as a form of 'house cleaning' in order to throw open the doors of the state to internationalisation.

Three imperatives emerged from this move towards a marketisation regime according to Considine (1996, p. 84) including: cutting back the size and scope of public organisations; shifting functions from the state into the non-government sector, incorporating both the private sector and non government human services sector, and bringing market methods into state organisations. Considine uses the term 'market bureaucracy' to point to the double impact of these changes on public service agencies. Government services that could not be easily privatised, for example those that delivered complex and highly sensitive legislation, were subjected to market testing through contracting, tendering and internal competition. In addition, market mechanisms were brought inside state organisations to structure the internal workings of public programmes. This provided a new rationality to service design and implementation as well as restructuring the way service users and communities were managed by these marketised organisations. According to Considine and Lewis (2003, p. 131) these reforms were not simply the evolution of better forms of organisation, but were part of a larger cultural contest over the way terms such as 'public interest' and 'public service' were to be understood.

The driving force towards change in this direction in Australia was the adoption by the Council of Australian Governments (COAG) of recommendations from a series of public inquiries that resulted in widespread ratification of a *National Competition Policy* in 1995. National Competition Policy (NCP) encouraged reforms that aimed to extend what was considered to be the productivity enhancing effects of competition to government and community services. NCP sought to bring about a more competitive, integrated national market through:

rationalising Commonwealth/State roles and responsibilities; reducing duplication in administration and delivery of services and programmes; promoting greater integration and coordination of services, and introducing new financing arrangements for a range of government and community based human service programmes (Kain, Kuruppu and Billing, 2003).

Federal government departments and agencies were required as a result of national competition policy to identify functions or services that could be opened to competition and transferred, in whole or part, to the private or non-government sectors. It was argued that only when the public service clearly added more value than might be achieved elsewhere was service delivery to be retained within public service agencies. Agencies were to benchmark themselves against all sectors to determine what they do best, what they could do to improve, what was more effectively delivered by the private or other sectors, or what should be discontinued (APSC, 2003, p. 121). The prospect of competition was intended to act as a spur to enhance public service productivity and programme effectiveness and to increase public servant responsiveness (MacDermott, 2008, p.25).

The purchase of service, or purchaser-provider model had particular appeal in Australia as an institutional arrangement for delivering government programmes. Human service organisations were increasingly funded and run in accordance with business principles, with a strengthening emphasis on such technologies as performance measurement, specification of outcomes, and drives for cost containment (APSC, 2003). Service providers, including some agencies within the umbrella of government, were increasingly required to engage in competitive tendering for the business of government (Considine, 2001).

The federal government's National Commission of Audit (NCA, 1996, p.23) proclaimed the principle of *contestability* in terms of mechanisms 'to ensure

competitive or contestable programme delivery', defining the concept as: 'the threat of competition in areas where traditionally the market cannot accommodate a number of suppliers'. This regime of contestability allowed the Australian Government to define parameters for success and to use the contestable environment it created to ensure policy compliance, flexibility and cost containment (Edwards, 1996, p.31). These were not true and open markets because the government continued to control the conditions under which services were provided. Under these conditions the government chose to regulate service provision through the adoption of a 'quasi market' approach (Healy, 1998; Considine, 2001). Of relevance to the focus of this thesis, the 'purchaser', in this case the Australian Government through its various departmental portfolios, sought to create open markets for service provision that reflected either an *actual* or a *potential* contest for funding.

A turn to corporatisation

A second key reform platform adopted by Australian governments involved a reform of governance structures to meet over time, what was considered to be the changing needs of public administration. This took the form of corporatisation, defined by the Australian Public Service Commission (APSC) as 'the creation of a corporate form, either a company under the general companies legislation, or a statutory authority under its own legislation' (APSC, 2003). In either case, an organisation is established to manage an operation, with its own board of directors responsible for making all decisions about the performance of its functions and the delivery of its services. Under the *Commonwealth Authorities and Companies Act,* 1997 the independence of a corporatised organisation is limited by government, which continues to provide broad policy direction, set targets and use its legal terms of ownership to ensure community service obligations are met (ASPC, 2003).

A turn to outsourcing

Another approach identified by the APSC to improve public sector efficiency and effectiveness was 'outsourcing'. This approach became an important element in the reform of employment services policy and practice at the Australian Government level from the mid 1990s, as discussed below, and refers to an arrangement whereby a private market or non-government sector provider performs an activity previously undertaken by a government agency. The Australian Government agency retained overall responsibility and accountability for the outsourced activity, function and service irrespective of the service delivery method (APSC, 2003 p. 123). Outsourcing involved market testing through a competitive tendering and contracting process and was advocated throughout the reform process as a means of delivering more client–focused services while achieving savings and maintaining accountability (ASPC, 2003 p.124).

A turn to enterprise

It could be argued that the principle of enterprise animates all of the abovementioned approaches to organising and providing government services. Enterprise and entrepreneurial spirit is increasingly lauded as an essential attribute to success in public sector institutions of all types in Australia, at the level of the institution and the individual employee. According to Paul du Gay (2004 p.38/39), the term 'enterprise' applies to:

> the ways in which economic, political, social and personal vitality is considered best achieved by the generalization of a particular conception of the enterprise form to all forms of conduct - to the conduct of organisations previously seen as non-commercial…to the conduct of government and its agencies and to the conduct of individuals.

John Law (2002, p. 34, cited in du Gay, 2004, p. 38) argues that this is not a simple appropriation of entrepreneurial practices from the private sector but instead, is an attempt to mimic through formal administrative mechanisms such as devolved budgeting, audit, performance appraisal and other practices, 'certain paradigmatic conceptions of appropriate market-based relations and subjectivities'. According to du Gay (2004, p. 38) entrepreneurial processes typically consist of assigning the performance of a specific function or an activity to a distinct unit of management - either an individual or a collective - which then becomes accountable for the efficient performance of that function or conduct of that activity. He goes on to argue that:

> by assuming active responsibility for these activities and functions, employees who were once subject to the bureaucratic lines of force of the state are made more responsible for securing their own future survival and wellbeing. Yet, at one and the same time they are to be steered politically from the centre 'at a distance' through the invention and deployment of a host of governmental techniques which can shape their actions while simultaneously attesting to their independence - techniques such as audits, devolved budgets, relational contracts and performance-related pay (du Gay, 2004 p. 40/41).

Criticisms of marketisation and modernisation of public services are usually deflected through reference to NPM discourses that contrast the 'dead hand of bureaucracy' - prone to red tape, lacking in creativity and flexibility, focused on process rather than outcome, rewarding safe decisions, inefficiency - with positive images of energetic and enterprising organisational cultures supporting reform agendas. This 'entrepreneurial discourse' fits comfortably within a 'master discourse' (Considine, 2000, p. 73) concerning efficiency, markets and competition.

A turn to performance

A key component of enterprise discourses has been the focus on 'performance'. Catherine McDonald (2006, p. 25) identifies performance management and performance indicators as additional technologies operating within the discursive formation of NPM that, in concert with related technologies of performance appraisal and performance-related pay, brought tools of calculative rationality to the reforming state. Public sector reforms throughout the 1990s focused on the measurement of effectiveness and on achieving organisational objectives through the following mechanisms: clarifying performance objectives and linking individual and business plans with organisational plans; periodic performance appraisal of individual and team performance against achievements and behaviours; recognising and rewarding performance; managing poor performance and, evaluating the contribution of individual and organisational performance (APSC, 2003, p. 66).

According to Michael Strain (2009, p. 74), this 'orientation to performance' gained ascendancy over time, generating a language of 'excellence' and a calculus of 'standards' that encoded a normative framework by which individuals and organisations were evaluated, by reference to 'value-added' increments of achievement. Of particular interest to this study is the range and diversity of performance responses made by social workers who were subjected throughout the period under investigation to what Strain (2009, p. 76) calls the 'regulatory regime of conformity' underpinning performance measurement and appraisal technologies.

Kathy MacDermott (2008, p. xv) summarises the key components of NPM at the Australian Government level as: making the work of public servants contestable; the introduction of performance management processes, including individual

performance assessment and pay; the devolution of centralised managerial controls to individual agencies; the restructuring of public sector industrial relations according to contract-based models, and the outsourcing of service delivery to third-party service providers, including profit-based and not-for-profit entities. These elements of reform were highly significant to the design of the Australian Government agency *Centrelink* and the service model developed to deliver employment service functions, as will be discussed in further detail below.

Forces shaping welfare reform across OECD nations

A turn to activation

A second layer of reform of significance to this study is the transnational welfare reform agenda that ran in parallel with NPM and new public *service* management[2] reforms during the period under investigation for this study. In line with NPM reform, the ideas seeding welfare reform were guided by neo-liberal principles and can be characterised as a turn to 'activation' in an effort to achieve the economic, political and technological requirements of globalisation. While a common neo-liberal ideology underpins both projects based on market-supporting principles, it can be argued that local differences arose in approaches to welfare policy design and implementation across OECD nations based on historical contingencies, political traditions, institutional structures, policy design legacies and coalitions of interest. However, over time and across many constituencies, welfare policies that enjoyed popular support and legitimacy in another age became portrayed as an increasing burden on otherwise productive economies. The case for reform of welfare states was perceived as self-evident, reinforced by pervasive accounts of welfare dependency, entrenched poverty, welfare abuse and escalating costs (Fraser and Gordon, 1994; Engels, 2006).

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[2] A term used by MacDermott (2008) to describe the specific trajectory of neo-liberal inspired organisational reforms as they were applied to the public service in Australia.

According to Perkins (2010) the 'activation' of people receiving welfare benefits became a core policy objective of social welfare and labour market policy in most OECD countries throughout the 1990s and continuing to today. Perkins describes activation as an attempt to transform employment assistance and social security systems to achieve employment outcomes through the development of explicit linkages between social protection policies, labour market participation and labour market programmes (Perkins, 2010, p. 268). This required moving unemployed people from so-called 'passive' to 'active' spaces[3], drawing on policy responses that aimed to enhance economic efficiency and productivity. This was constructed in activation discourse as an expectation that welfare recipients would be required to move beyond simply *needing* support to *becoming* active economic and social citizens.

In the context of Australia, Sheila Shaver (2002, p. 332) conceptualised this approach to welfare reform as transforming welfare 'from a limited social right to support provided on condition, and from treating the claimant as a sovereign individual, to a subject of paternalistic supervision'. The increased conditionality imposed on welfare receipt has been accompanied in many constituencies, including Australia, by a shift in moral and political assumptions that allow for the imposition of punitive penalties where people are judged to have breached their obligations to the state (Carney, 2007).

A turn to aspiration

Welfare reform measures in the United States, the United Kingdom and Australia throughout the 1990s were increasingly focused on transforming the allegedly passive social citizen into a socially mobile and aspirational active citizen

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[3] Both terms were used explicitly within Centrelink and the former Job Network, as described by social work participants in this study. Another related term used by both organisations was 'job ready stock', a term used to refer to people who were ready to be referred for active employment assistance.

(Clinton and Gore 1992; Botsman and Latham, 2001; Blair, 2002, Raco, 2009). This 'active citizen' was increasingly portrayed within welfare reform discourse as an active 'customer' who was expected to take on a greater role and new responsibilities in managing the conditions under which services were to be provided to them (Gilliatt, Fenwick and Alford, 2000; Jordan, 2000).

This turn to aspiration created an impetus across the UK and Australia to devise policies and programmes that were in tune with the principle of individualisation. Harris and White (2009, p.168) argue that the momentum behind this approach to policy and service design results from an appropriation of notions of 'consumer culture' attributed to the wider society, with users of human services assumed to have a keen desire for participation in and making active choices about the services they receive in the public sector.

The trajectory of welfare reform in Australia

According to Yeend (2000) there have been remarkably few occasions in the history of welfare provision in Australia when full-scale reviews have been followed by comprehensive reforms to the systems of provision. A review of the history of the welfare system in Australia shows that while there have been frequent changes to welfare programmes since the introduction of a federal income support system in 1909, these changes have occurred on an ad-hoc and incremental basis with bursts of activity that corresponded with political and economic cycles (Kewley, 1973). Generally, welfare programmes have evolved over time at the federal government level and have been replaced when successive governments perceived or constructed different needs within a context of social, economic and political change.

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to chart a detailed course of welfare policy reform history in Australia but it is instructive to go back to 1986 to the first major review of income support policy to set the scene for a more detailed focus on changes that occurred during the period under investigation for this study – the years 1997 to the close of 2007. The following summary of welfare reform changes is necessarily selective and focused on initiatives that went on to be significant to the work of social workers in the field of income support in Australia - the subjects of this research.

The Social Security Review – activating the state and individuals

The *Social Security Review* was established in 1986 by the Hawke Labor government (1983-1991). The Review was commissioned to develop a long-term perspective on priorities in the income security system and, where needed, new directions for income security were to be implemented (Yeend, 2000). The Review led to substantive restructuring of the social security system, including the introduction of several new income support programmes. It also fostered an increased awareness and emphasis on *active* elements within income support programmes. This was mainly in terms of linking receipt of assistance to access to work assistance measures like training and job placement measures for unemployed people and the introduction of specialised programmes for sole parents and people with disabilities who wished to re-enter the workforce in some capacity (Yeend, 2000).

Yeend (2000) argues that many of the changes to existing programmes and new programmes initiated from the mid-1980s and well into the 1990s can claim to have their origins wholly or partially in the Social Security Review. Some of the significant changes arising from the Review of specific relevance to this study pre-empted a shift from what was considered 'passive' income support to more

'active' measures designed to place a stronger emphasis on work search efforts. A key reform from the Social Security Review was the abolition of unemployment benefit for 16-17 year olds and its replacement with Job Search Allowance in 1988, signifying a greater emphasis on education retention and work search efforts and requirements. This reform was the beginning of a raft of changes to the income support system for young unemployed people who had been increasingly locked out of full-time and ongoing employment opportunities due to global economic restructuring.

The Review also led to the introduction of the Newstart Allowance in 1989, replacing the unemployment benefit for people who were unemployed for 12 months or more. This precursor to later 'active employment' assistance measures contained the following features: intensive interviews that sought to identify barriers to employment; referral to training and labour market programmes and, tougher work search effort requirements. In 1991, the *Disability Reform Package* was introduced which featured the replacement of the invalid pension with the disability support pension, entailing new qualification criteria that placed more emphasis on work capacity rather than functional impairment or disability. In addition, there was specific funding for training and rehabilitation programmes for those on the disability support pension and the sickness allowance, to encourage employment participation and the maximising of self-support from employment.

A number of positive initiatives targeting sole parents commenced in 1987 that sought to encourage increased employment participation. This included the introduction of an education supplement, an earnings credit scheme and an extension of fringe benefits during the initial period of employment to facilitate a return to the workforce. This initiative also saw the introduction in 1989 of the Jobs, Education and Training (JET) Scheme, providing personalised assistance to return to work, educational programmes and referral to and assistance with child care services.

Working Nation: Introducing 'reciprocal obligation'

The Keating Labor Government (1991-1996) initiated the next major welfare reform programme in 1994. The *Working Nation* policy package, introduced under the banner of 'reciprocal obligation' (Wright, Marston and McDonald, 2011) included a significant expansion in labour market programmes, case management of the unemployed, a youth training initiative, training wages for all trainees (including adults), direct job creation in the form of the *New Work Opportunities* programme, a conditional guarantee of a job for long-term unemployed people called the *Job Compact*, and changes to the income support system (Junakar and Kapcscinski, 1998). According to Fowkes (2011), the Working Nation policy platform was an 'active labour market programme' in that it required unemployed people to actively look for work and prove that they had done so, and to accept suitable work if it was offered. Fowkes (2011, p. 15) defines active labour market measures as programmes where participation is compulsory for unemployed people, generally requiring attendance at interviews and acceptance of jobs if offered.

The rationale behind these labour market initiatives was to provide active assistance to the unemployed, particularly the long-term unemployed, at a time when the business cycle was showing signs of recovery after a long recession and the unemployment rate was beginning to fall rapidly (Junakar and Kapcscinski, 1998, p. 25). According to Junakar and Kapcscinski, the most tangible aspect of the Working Nation reform package that affected the long-term unemployed was the *Job Compact*, which was designed to offer a full-time job for at least twelve months, mainly in the private sector, to any person who had been on Newstart Allowance for more than eighteen months. The Job Compact was to be formalised through a contractual agreement with an individual case manager and the participant was required to accept any reasonable job offer (Chapman, 1994).

At around the same time, there was a challenge to the 48-year monopoly held on the provision of services to the unemployed by the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). This involved an experiment to contract a proportion of case management roles to a variety of private and community bodies (Donald, 1996, p. 24). This approach created a limited competitive market whereby contracted case management was tendered at a fixed price, with the CES holding on to a share of the market within the public sector (Wright, Marston and McDonald, 2011, p. 307). This became the precursor to a more muscular approach to the marketisation of labour market programmes throughout the next decade (O'Sullivan, Considine and Lewis, 2009). With the election of the Howard Coalition government in March 1996, all Working Nation labour market programmes were terminated, and a significant overall decrease in expenditure on labour market programmes was announced in the 1996-97 Budget (Junakar and Kapcscinski, 1996, p. 26).

The emergence of new forms of conditionality – the Welfare to Work agenda

The Australian welfare reform agenda gained significant momentum with the election of the Liberal-National Coalition government, led by John Howard in 1996. For the first few years welfare reforms were fairly limited in scope, leaving space for the government to focus on 'radical' service delivery reforms (Considine, 2001) in the spheres of income support and employment services, including the abolition of the DSS and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) and their replacement with *Centrelink*. However, as a taste of what was to come, legislation was introduced into parliament in March 1997 to support the adoption of pilot schemes for the newly created *Work For the Dole* programme, an exemplar of the principle of 'mutual obligation' that characterised the welfare to work agenda over the next decade. Wright et al. (2011, p. 307) draw on literature from the US in their use of the term 'workfare' to encapsulate various compulsory work schemes, including 'work for the dole', that require the unemployed to contribute to society as a condition of receiving income support.

These pilot schemes were applied at the time to selected job seekers between the ages of 18 and 34 and compelled participants to attend in order to meet their mutual obligation requirements (Wright et al., 2011).

The Howard government was determined to fundamentally overhaul labour market assistance through the creation of the Job Network in May 1998. Over time, the government privatised the whole of the employment service, becoming the first OECD nation to take this approach (O'Sullivan, Considine and Lewis, 2009). According to Fowkes (2011, p. 6) the Job Network was designed on 'work first' principles, the aim being to 'get people into full time work and get them there fast'. In July 1999, the then Minister for Employment, Tony Abbott explained the rationale behind the Coalition government's integration of welfare and employment policy and services (Abbott, 1999, p. 1):

> What this Government is trying to do is change a culture of welfare to a culture of work. We're trying to replace an ethic of entitlement with an ethic of responsibility, and I have got to say for Newstart beneficiaries, the era of unconditional welfare is over. It's over!

Introducing the participation agenda – the virtues of self reliance

In November 1999, the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman announced the government's intention to conduct a major welfare review (Newman, 1999). In announcing the review, the government proposed a set of welfare principles it wished to take into a future reform agenda. The details of principles guiding the review can be found in Appendix 1.

A high-level reference group was established in September 1999, chaired by the then Chief Executive Officer of *Mission Australia*, Patrick McClure. The

reference group presented a final Green Paper, titled 'Participation Support for a More Equitable Society' (Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 2000), often referred to as the 'McClure Report', to the Minister in August 2000 calling for fundamental change, suggesting action in five major areas: individualised service delivery systems incorporating personalised needs assessments, negotiated participation plans, specialist interventions for people with disabilities, sole parents and other groups with additional barriers to employment; a simplified and more responsive income support structure; incentives and financial assistance to support workforce participation; mutual obligations, expressed broadly as a recognition that government, business, communities and individuals are held together by a web of mutual expectations which in some situations should be made requirements; and, social partnerships through which social partners work to enhance community capacity, including community economic development, community-business partnerships, social enterprises and fostering micro-businesses.

In May 2001, the government responded to the welfare review report and announced a policy platform they called *Australians Working Together (AWT),* substantially changing the social support system for working aged people. According to Halligan and Wills (2008, p. 188), a key aspect of this reform programme was a determined effort by the government to move away from what they saw as 'passive' forms of welfare and 'dependency' to approaches that emphasised the *mutual obligation* of welfare recipients to the community that supported them. In taking this approach to implementation of welfare reform, the Coalition government chose to emphasise penalties over the incentives recommended in the McClure Report, reflecting an ideological and political commitment to the 'work first' principles outlined in the early days of its term of office (Mendes, 2009).

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'Work-first' - extending the reach of mutual obligation

The Howard Coalition government sought to reform the disability payments system in 2001 with the implementation of its *Australians Working Together* (AWT) policy platform but was thwarted in its attempts because of an inability to garner sufficient political support without a majority in the upper house (Soldatic and Pini, 2009). The government became emboldened to intensify earlier welfare reform measures when it gained control of the Senate following re-election in 2004, this time extending mutual obligation requirements to include sole parents and people with disabilities. The 2005-2006 Federal Budget saw the introduction of tighter eligibility rules for the Disability Support Pension (DSP), restricting entitlement to people who were assessed as being able to work for less than 15 hours a week (Australian Department of Treasury, 2006, p. 82). New claimants who did not meet this work capacity threshold were required to apply for Newstart Allowance at a significantly lower rate of payment and subject to stringent activity requirements (Mendes, 2009). In addition, new applicants for the Parenting Payment (single) would be transferred to the lower rate of Newstart Allowance when their youngest child turned six, becoming subject to a part-time work test of at least 15 hours per week.

The government expressed the rationale for these changes in 2005/2006 Budget overview papers in the following statement:

> Strong economic growth and the increasing desire for and availability of part-time work provide an opportunity to rebalance Australia's welfare system so that it better meets the needs of the 21st century. The outdated approach of people on welfare being expected to seek work only when they can work full time will be replaced. Policy will focus on encouraging self-reliance and recognising the capacity of many recipients to work part-time.

This approach recognises that the best form of income comes from a job, not welfare (Australian Department of Finance and Administration, 2006, p. 11).

Mendes (2009, p. 106) concluded that many single parents and people with disabilities would be forced through these systemic changes to accept any job available, irrespective of the wage being offered, so gaining employment would not necessarily guarantee a living wage any longer.

Into the breach - compliance and income management regimes

The final area of welfare policy reform of significance to the context of this study was the implementation of increasingly punitive social security penalties. The imposition of financial penalties has been a feature of the social security system since at least 1979 (Eardley, Brown, Rawsthorne, Norris and Emrys, 2005) – most often applied in the case of unemployed people who were assessed to have made insufficient efforts to look for work. Compliance activity became more intensive with the implementation of the Welfare to Work policy platform and the tightening of participation requirements administered by Centrelink and monitored by Job Network providers.

In the early years of Welfare to Work, Centrelink breaches occurred when an unemployed person failed to comply with activity or administrative test criteria

set out within Centrelink administrative guidelines. A detailed history of the evolving breaching system is beyond the scope of this thesis but in broad terms, people subject to penalties were confronted with the imposition of increasingly onerous non-payment periods if assessed to have 'breached' activity test or administrative system requirements. As sole parents and people with disabilities were drawn into mutual obligation requirements, penalties applied to a broader group of income support recipients. An eight-week non-payment period applied

to those who, without a reasonable excuse, failed to comply with their participation requirements three or more times in a 12-month period (Centrelink, 2003). A 'failure' penalty could be imposed in situations where: a job offer was refused, a person was dismissed from employment due to misconduct or left a job voluntarily, or where a long-term unemployed person failed to participate in a full-time Work for the Dole programme (Centrelink, 2003).

In 2006 the penalty regime was amended to introduce a system of 'financial case management' (FCM) for people who faced an 8-week non-payment period who had dependant children or those considered 'exceptionally vulnerable' - precisely defined within the policy (Centrelink, 2006). Financial case management entails a system of interviews with either a contracted non-government service provider or, in the absence of such a provider a Centrelink social worker, to negotiate the payment of essential expenses throughout the duration of the eight-week non-payment period. Essential expenses were considered to be those expenses that a person incurred that were required to sustain their dependents or meet their particular needs because of their exceptional vulnerability. The limit to the payment of expenses was the maximum amount the person would have been paid if their income support payment had not been stopped (Centrelink, 2006).

Compulsory income management was introduced in 2007 in Indigenous communities across the Northern Territory as part of the so-called 'Northern Territory Emergency Response'. Income management involves withholding a certain percentage of social security benefits and placing this money in a separate account that can only be only used to purchase what is considered to be 'essential' items. The proportion of money held is usually 50% but can be up to 70% and usually 100% of any lump sum payments, such as the 'baby bonus'. Recipients must negotiate arrangements with Centrelink to pay their bills with the quarantined amount through a 'Basics Card' (Centrelink, 2006).

New Labor Government – new national welfare reform agenda?

The incoming Rudd Labor Government made significant amendments to the breaching regime following its election to office in 2007, making the system of penalties less onerous for most income support recipients. However, in 2011 the Gillard Labor Government began a process of implementing an extensive national reform agenda in relation to welfare recipients in disadvantaged regions, beginning with pilot programmes in selected localities across the country. The focus this time was on what the government called 'dysfunctional families and communities' (FaHCSIA, 2011), extending beyond the Indigenous policy domain.

A small number of 'place based income management pilot schemes' were initiated in 2009 in low-income communities across Australia, focusing on measures to increase school attendance and to intervene in families where child protection matters were reported to state authorities. In language familiar to observers of welfare reform over the past decade, the current Labor government expressed the rationale for these reforms in the following terms:

> The Australian Government is committed to progressively reforming the welfare and family assistance payment system to foster responsibility and to provide a platform for people to move up and out of welfare dependence. Governments have a responsibility, particularly in relation to vulnerable and at risk citizens, to ensure income support payments are beneficial and contribute to individuals' wellbeing. The Government believes that the first call on these payments should be life essentials and the interests of children (FHCSIA, 2011, p. 4).

This study focuses on the way social workers in the case study organisation Centrelink related to and responded to this changing policy and working context. Centrelink underwent extensive change during the period under investigation and

the social work service was challenged to lay down roots in the shifting sands of this changing environment. This will be discussed in further detail in later chapters of this thesis.

Chapter review

This chapter identified and explored a trajectory of intersecting public sector management and welfare policy reforms that scaffolded changes to the structures and processes of government in Australia over a period of more than thirty years. This discussion also highlighted changes to the prevailing discourses and practices that animated the 'reforming state' movement in Australia, including a turn to technologies of accounting, managerialism, marketisation, corporatisation, outsourcing, public enterprise, activation and aspiration. This discussion set the scene for an examination of the impact of these broad trends on institutional arrangements for the delivery of income support and employment services policy in Australia. Public servants, including social workers, within Centrelink were confronted over time with new challenges of calculability, coordination, accountability and transparency, within a regime of contestability that had the potential to engender feelings of insecurity about the continuing viability of the organisation and the continuing role of public servants in this field. It was argued that this regime of contestability sought to discipline the organisation and its public servant workforce to be responsive towards their involvement in the administration of increasingly stringent welfare reform measures throughout the period under investigation.

Chapter Two moves on to explore the impact of organisational reforms and welfare policy changes on perceptions of the role, status and identities of social workers within the reforming state. The discussion will situate the study for this thesis within an ongoing debate about the future and legitimacy of social work within state welfare institutions, before moving on to survey literature focused on

social work experiences of, and engagement with, organisational and policy reforms. The overarching theme for the remainder of this thesis will be the processes by which social workers *become*, or are *produced* in response to the sorts of organisational and policy reforms explored in Chapter One.

CHAPTER TWO: 'Crushed by the system'[4]? Social work in the reforming state

Introduction

Chapter One provided an account of conditions that gave rise to the emergence of new approaches to government and governing within Australia over the past 30 years, with a specific focus on the rise of NPM and welfare policy reform agendas put in place by successive Australian federal governments. Chapter Two builds on this account to situate this study within a body of literature that explores the impact of these changes on social workers. This requires a focus on the consequences of NPM workplace strategies and welfare policy reforms for individual social workers and the ways in which these interrelated reforms seek to change the person experiencing the changes.

This chapter is structured as follows: The first section begins with a broad discussion about changing perceptions of the role, status and identities of professionals within the types of organisational and policy reform contexts outlined in Chapter One. The rationale for focusing on shifting constructions of professional identity within organisations is that it establishes an orientation for exploring social workers' efforts, as a category of professionals, to make meaning of and respond to their changing organisational roles. This discussion leads to a more focused examination on debates about the future and legitimacy of social workers within state welfare institutions transformed by neo-liberal principles and practices. The chapter ends with a review of literature produced within a range of disciplinary fields that theorises the ways in which organisational agents engage with and shape workplace practices.

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[4] This phrase is drawn from a quote by Monica Kjørstad (2005, pp. 392/393) documented in this chapter on page 64.

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Accounts of professionalism within emerging policy and organisational contexts

A survey of literature produced over the past thirty years about the role, status and identity of professionals suggests there has been a significant erosion of trust in professionals by government, policy makers, employers, and the broader citizenry. Much of the contemporary scholarship on the declining status of professionals looks back to a time when professional trust and related autonomy were conferred on the basis of broadly accepted professional ethics, underpinned by claims to 'moral purity' (Erde, 2008, p. 21) and notions of public value and integrity of purpose.

Gerard Hanlon (1998, p. 50) argues that in the 1970s and 1980s, social service professionals within the state professional sector in the United Kingdom (UK) came under attack, resulting in a 'struggle for the soul of professionalism' as elements within established professions and newly emerging professions sought to define what professionalism meant. According to Hanlon, dominant managerial discourses came to pervade organisations in which social service professionals practised, requiring them to go beyond professional ethics and competence to a privileging of the ability to manage other employees, to balance budgets, to manage and satisfy clients and to act in an entrepreneurial way. Hanlon charts a path towards what he calls 'commercial professionalism' (Hanlon, 1998, p. 51) via the introduction of quasi-markets within health and human services. The thrust of these reforms according to Hanlon has been to make professionals accountable to a managerial logic and to enforce financial and managerial discipline upon them.

Jill Blackmore (2004, p. 27) traces the evolution of a managerial discourse of professionalism that applies new standards and approaches to assessing the value of professionals as part of what she terms 'the cult of continual improvement'

(Blackmore, 2004, p. 27). Blackmore describes this as a mode of 'technical professionalism', which is premised upon a managerially prescribed definition of expertise as well as an adherence to standards that are set from outside professional bodies.

Blackmore argues that the emergence of managerial organisational forms saw the development and entrenchment of an audit society and new accountability regimes that were imposed by managers and that were symbolic of a decline in trust in the public sector and the professions. She asserts that these measures provide a level of visibility that satisfies political and market demand for data and efficiency, which she refers to as 'performative exercises' (Blackmore, 2004, p. 28) that have little meaning for those who do the work on a daily basis. In fact, according to Blackmore, these performative exercises often distract, undermine and change the nature of the core work performed by professionals within public sector organisations and by implication, impact upon the identity of workers compelled to perform this work (Blackmore, 2004, p. 22).

The brief discussion thus far points to a perceived tension between a form of professionalism that is premised on the capacity of professionals to work autonomously to enact codified ethical and practice principles, contrasted with a professional practice agenda that is set from outside the profession and inimical to professional normative ethics and commitments. Dent and Whitehead (2002, p. 2/3) represent this distinction in their statement:

> Whatever trust and respect is accorded the professional now has to be earned through their ability to perform to an externally given set of performance indicators… Professionals can no longer consider themselves 'above' the marketplace… [Professionals are now required to] perform their market orientated professional tasks …with an entrepreneurial flourish.

Julia Evetts (2009) suggests that there are new, different and competing forms of professionalism arising from the emergence of NPM discourses and practices. She identifies two potentially different 'ideal type' forms of professionalism, which she classifies as 'organisational professionalism' and 'occupational professionalism' (Evetts, 2009, p. 248). Evetts suggests that an ideal-type *organisational* professionalism is 'manifested by a discourse of control, incorporating rational-legal forms of authority and hierarchical structures of responsibility and decision-making' (2009, p. 248). Evetts argues that in line with this model, organisational professionalism is consistent with managerialist control, focused on the standardisation of work procedures and the imposition of external managerial forms of regulation and accountability measures.

Evetts goes on to detail a contrasting model of professional formation that informs the ideal type she refers to as *occupational* professionalism, which she suggests is 'manifested by a discourse constructed within professional occupational groups, incorporating collegial authority based on practitioner autonomy, discretionary judgment and assessment' (Evetts, 2009, p. 248). In contrast to managerialist authority, this professional discourse is operationalised through regulation arising from professional practitioners themselves, informed by codes of professional ethics and monitored by professional bodies.

A similar representation is found in social work literature that posits a distinction between social work as *organisational* work and social work as *professional* work (Hughes and Wearing, 2008; Evans, 2009). Social work described as 'organisational' work is circumscribed by a context constituted by the defined role of social workers in a specific practice context, incorporating a social worker's interpretation of this role and the legislative, policy and organisational shaping of the role (Peut, 2000, p. 50). Social work as 'professional' work aspires to transcend the everyday concerns and limitations of specific workplaces to prioritise codified collective professional commitments. Lymbery and Butler

(2004, p. 4) conceptualise this distinction as a challenge faced by social workers in 'negotiating the slippage between the potential or the ideals of social work as a professional activity and the reality of social work as organisational work'.

The essence of this discussion is that professional knowledge, ideals and codified commitments, including those professed by social work, are no longer sufficient to secure workplace legitimacy and attendant status and influence. Social workers as organisational members face the challenge of engaging with new accountability regimes and externally imposed standards for assessing their performance in the context of emergent managerial discourses of professionalism. This thesis explores the possibility that such contextual challenges influence the way social workers come to understand and value themselves in their daily negotiation of the micropolitics of their changing workplaces.

The next section turns to a debate about the future and legitimacy of social work within state welfare institutions through a critical review of commentary and empirical investigations by mainly British and Australian social work academics during the period 1997 to 2008. Scholars have largely framed the broad parameters of this debate, at least in the public arena, as they speculate whether the social work profession across political systems informed by neo-liberal guiding ideologies is 'struggling for its soul' (Butler and Drakeford, 2001, p. 15) in response to externally imposed political, managerial and performative agendas. This debate conceptualises the social work profession as having a 'collective identity' (Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Starke and Warne, 2010, p. 112) that has been increasingly challenged over the past thirty or so years by emerging organisational and social policy changes.

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Accounts of social work responses to neo-liberal management and policy reforms

Contesting the legitimacy of social work within state welfare agencies

Reaching back to its earliest days as an aspiring profession, social work literature is replete with critical commentary about the way the collective social work profession has responded to various contextual challenges, particularly in relation to the exercise of its avowed social justice commitments (Crimeen and Wilson, 1997; Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Ferguson and Lavalette, 2004). If a common theme could be identified amongst these narrative accounts it would be that social workers have struggled over time to proffer an effective collective response to workplace and policy challenges brought about through reforms to public welfare systems. This is usually conceptualised as a gap between social work ideals and their accomplishment within regulated organisational practice.

While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed survey of these historical accounts, it is useful to highlight some of the more recent scholarship on this topic in order to inform and contextualise this study. Narratives of change within this body of literature draw attention to the challenges faced by social workers in maintaining professional ethics and values in the face of increasingly prescriptive managerial practices and contested social policies. Martyn Jones (M. Jones, 2000, p. 366) characterises this challenge as maintaining a sense of 'integrity' within the professional sphere, which he interprets as social workers striving for a convergence of practices and espoused values.

Gary Hough (2003, p. 214) suggests that social work in public welfare settings has always been constructed from directions other than the models, frameworks and values that 'resided in the heads and hearts of…practitioners'. Hough added

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that social workers in public welfare settings have always had to practice within organisational contexts 'indifferent or even inimical to the core values that they bring to their work' (Hough, 2003, p. 214). It could be argued that this is particularly the case for social workers employed in government public service settings – the context for the study informing this thesis - because of the statutory requirement to hold in balance: personal values, aims, identifications and motivations; codified professional values and commitments; agency policy, role statements, mandates and guidelines for professional practice, and codified public service values and regulations.

A relatively early contribution to Australian scholarship on the status and legitimacy of social work within the reforming state is a 1997 review of literature by Kelly Crimeen and Lou Wilson (1997), the title of which expresses a key theme in this debate: *'Economic rationalism or social justice: a challenge for social workers'*. The authors conclude that economic rationalist inspired market reforms into human services compromise codified social work values through reorienting practices to focus on policing social deviancy at the expense of maintaining a broader social justice stance. They concluded at the time that '[t]he implications of this trend indicate that social workers may need to make a choice between working within an economic rationalist paradigm for human services or refocusing on a fight for social justice' (Crimeen and Wilson, 1997, p.47).

This theme is taken up by Andrew Jones (2000, p. 150) in his reflection on the capacity of the social work profession in Australia to maintain its social ethic and values while simultaneously addressing the issue of continuing viability and sustainability within the changing welfare state. He refers to a clearly identified stance and a broad mission professed by the collective social work profession that is underpinned by a codified commitment to social justice. However, according to Jones:

> The manifest discrepancy between the realisation of (or even progress
> towards) this espoused mission and the experiences and achievements of
> social work practice has resulted in a vigorous literature, and arguably an
> equally vigorous practice, of self-criticism and self-doubt (A. Jones, 2000,
> p.151).

According to Jim Ife (1997), the social work profession in Australia evolved
within a narrow and conservative construction of professionalism focused on a
paradigm of individualised professional services, making it difficult to adopt a
critical stance within a practice environment that is becoming increasingly hostile
to critical social work values. In revisiting this analysis at a later date he argued
that:

> If…the welfare state is in crisis and is undergoing a process of
> transformation, it will be necessary for social work to relocate itself if it is to
> remain relevant in pursuing its avowed ends of human rights and social
> justice (Ife, 2000, p.139).

Ife advocates for a relocation of social work from state based services to
potentially more innovative sites of practice such as community-based welfare
organisations informed by communitarian principles. This would, according to
Ife, involve 'a move from the more conventional paradigm of individualised,
professionalised services towards holistic approaches to enacting [social work's]
articulated value position grounded in human rights and social justice' (Ife, 2000,
p. 145).

At the core of this discussion is an assumption that regulated organisational life
makes it impossible for social workers in their organisational roles to enact social
justice commitments. As such, social workers must choose to *either* work in

mainstream social institutions, thereby capitulating to workplace limitations, *or* seek other avenues for enacting social justice commitments.

An alternative view is offered by Martyn Jones (2000) who contends that notwithstanding the value of these critiques, social work has a legitimate role to play in state welfare institutions as long as attention is paid by the professional bodies and by individual social workers to matters of integrity in relation to social work's vocational ethic. Jones argues:

> Understanding issues of integrity in human service organisations requires not simply examining the vocational ethic and how staff arrive at compromises between their ideals and the realities. It involves examining the significance attached to changes and the manner of determining a moral project which can withstand the rigour of critical analysis and the rigours of changing organisational forms within which commitments are to be enacted (M. Jones, 2000, p.377).

Jones concludes that enacting such commitments is an ongoing project that incorporates both personal exploration and socio-political analysis in a mutually reinforcing relationship (M. Jones, 2000, p. 377).

Jan Fook (2002) extends the boundaries of this debate by drawing attention to the potential agency social workers possess within their workplace contexts. Fook (2002, p. 162) argues: 'it is important for social workers to reframe practice as working *with* contextual environments, rather than working *despite* environments' [emphasis added]. As organisational members, social workers should, according to Fook, see themselves as responsible for aspects of that context and thereby act on possibilities for change through creating different microclimates within broader contexts. Along similar lines, Karen Healy argues that conventional

critical analyses of the challenges confronting social workers 'overlook the emancipatory potential in every day social work practices by establishing standards that devalue much of the change activity in which social workers are involved' (Healy, 2000, p. 5). She identifies the importance of destabilising social work discourses to emphasise contextuality, diversity and complexity of local practices of change. Healy concludes that further research is required to address progressive practice possibilities in settings such as bureaucracies, hospitals and other statutory settings (Healy, 2000, p. 135).

While debates such as these are necessary for raising awareness about broad structural and systemic challenges confronting the collective social work profession in its engagement with the reforming state, they need to be supplemented by practice-centred accounts of the responses to these changes by social workers within specific contexts of practice. The following discussion moves on to survey research findings about the *impact of* organisational and policy reforms on social work practice, before moving on to highlight findings from a relatively small number of empirical studies that have focused on workplace based *responses by* social workers as organisational agents.

Exploring accounts of the impact of organisational and policy reforms on social work practice

This discussion draws on accounts found predominantly in the British, Australian and Scandinavian (specifically Norway and Sweden) social work literature that focus on the impact of NPM and/or welfare policy reforms on social workers employed in public welfare settings. The period of time in focus is the year 1997 to early 2008, embracing the period under investigation for the study that informs this thesis. The decision to focus on scholarship from Britain, Australia, Norway and Sweden was made because of the similarity in welfare service infrastructure found in these nations as well as a broadly similar trajectory of policy and practice

reform throughout this period of time. These nations employ social workers, amongst other professionals, in the implementation of social welfare reform agendas within government public service agencies; at the national level in Australia, and at the municipal level in Britain, Sweden and Norway, as well as in 'community' (Australia) and 'voluntary' (British) not-for-profit services, and to varying degrees, in contracted 'for-profit' agencies in these nations.

Commentaries on change and uncertainty in social work

The early years of the new millennium saw an escalation of reflection in the social work literature about what was widely represented to be a period of extraordinary change and uncertainty facing social work and the human services. The detail of those contextual changes was canvassed in the first chapter of this thesis, with a focus on the global political, economic and social factors that animated policy and practice responses. The following discussion provides a brief survey of the ways social work scholars apprehended the changing social work landscape in Britain and Australia during the period 1997 to 2008, with respect to the implications of the restructuring of the state, economy and society for human service workers in general and for social workers in particular.

A focus on Britain

A particular preoccupation of British social work scholars in the early years of the New Labour government, elected in 1997, was a perceived gap between government policy rhetoric, which appeared broadly consistent at the time with social work ideals, and a realpolitik that saw social workers largely excluded from new programmes that sought to redress health, economic and social inequalities (Butler and Drakeford, 2004). A number of commentators lamented missed opportunities for social work in Britain, with the government electing to confine

the profession to tightly specified roles as 'care managers' in an overstretched and highly regulated public sector involved with the identification and supervision of service users deemed to be problematic (C. Jones, 2001; Orme, 2001; Stepney, 2005; McDonald, Postle and Dawson, 2008).

Bill Jordan and Chris Jordan (Jordan with Jordan, 2000) pursued a related theme in their argument that an emerging policy climate that might have been conducive to the advance of social work, instead saw the social work profession in Britain become politically compromised and compliant. They offer one of the most evocative metaphors in recent social work scholarship in their description of social work as 'the dog that didn't bark'[5]:

> Familiar, faded and slightly discredited, [social work] remains unobtrusively in the background – the dog that didn't bark amid all the frenetic activity. Why didn't it bark? And if the reason was that the new masters of the house had about them a well-known scent, and used well-recognised words in well-loved voices, why did they not in turn greet the faithful hound and reward it with a little praise, if only for past services? (Jordan with Jordan, 2000, p.15).

This quote is intended by its authors to vivify their argument that the New Labour government in its ideological mistrust of social workers, sidelined social work and relegated the profession to highly regulated service rationing roles. These authors lament the fact that social work was not factored into the design of emerging programmes, designed – but largely unrealised - to remediate poverty and social exclusion (Jordan with Jordan, 2000).

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[5] With a nod to Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's fictional character Sherlock Holmes in the story *Silver Blaze*. The reference is to a clue to the solution of a midnight murder mystery hinging upon the 'curious incident of the dog in the night-time' with Holmes proclaiming: 'I had grasped the significance of the silence of the dog, for one true inference invariably suggests others...Obviously the midnight visitor was someone whom the dog knew well'.

In later writing, Bill Jordan (2004, p. 5) argues that social work's roots in nineteenth century individualism left it particularly vulnerable to co-option into a practice agenda reliant on coercive measures to discipline citizens who failed to make the necessary or successful efforts to succeed in an increasingly individualistic and competitive economic environment. Jordan goes on to suggest that social work as a collective profession became 'adaptable' and 'flexible' in its negotiation of the neo-liberal values that informed the types of organisational transformation and occupational fragmentation suggested in the above discussion. In Jordan's view, public sector social work was simply following the lead taken by government policy, managerial dictate and ideological shift. This New Labour agenda, according to Jordan, appropriated the identities, language and values of social work in its mainstream marketing and mission statements. He states:

> It is as if most of the language of social work ethics and practice has been taken away from it, and put to official use elsewhere in the official structures of governance; but social work practitioners and agencies themselves are still seen as unsound and suspect, not to be trusted to implement major policies or manage important issues (Jordan, 2004, p. 6).

Jordan goes on to propose that social work was oriented to adapting to neo-liberal principles underpinning constructs such as the 'enabling state' (Taylor, 2000, p.372) because the profession's value base and techniques were rooted within an individualist tradition (Jordan, 2004, p. 11). Jordan argues that this value base underpinned social work's mission in its focus on the needs of citizens with special disadvantages, usually in individualised ways. It follows, according to Jordan, that social work was primed to adapt to the requirements of neo-liberal dictates predicated on 'technologies of the self' sourced from psychological understandings and a high regard for 'individual motivation, self-knowledge, self-esteem, confidence, personal effectiveness and personal development' (Jordan,

2004, p. 11). Jordan raises the question of social work's apparent adaptability to neo-liberal principles and practices in his statement:

> So far [in this article] I have argued as if social work has been entirely passive in its transformation, as if government and changed social relations act upon it, but it responds in an inert way, simply being moulded to others' purposes. Of course, this is not the case. Social work has often actively embraced these changes, and some of its characteristics have made it easy to adapt (Jordan, 2004, p.10).

Jordan's statement acknowledges and seeks to explain a level of active social work engagement with neo-liberal inspired policy and organisational transformation. His analysis is situated within an ongoing debate in the international social work literature about the overpowering of social work's vision, often depicting a landscape with little opportunity to oppose neo-liberalism's hegemonic tenets (Wallace and Pease, 2011). For example, in a more recent contribution focused on social work with children and families, Steve Rogowski (2011, p. 9) suggests that social workers 'are often so busy at getting the job done that they are in danger of losing sight of what and who they are, including their professional uniqueness and style of intervention'. Rogowski argues that modernising developments often led to social workers having to work their way through a 'maze of new rules and procedures, while simultaneously adhering to deadlines and targets to achieve organisational performance indicators' (Rogowski, 2011, p. 9). This debate will be re-visited in more depth in the later sections of this chapter.

A focus on Australia

While Australia followed a similar trajectory of reform to that of Britain, the impact of broadly similar policy and organisational reforms took different shape.

These differences can be understood as arising from the contingent nature of social work, which according to McDonald, Harris and Wintersteen (2003, p. 192) is dependent on the context in which it emerges and with which it engages. One key difference of particular relevance to the focus of this thesis is the longstanding involvement of a significant number of Australian social workers in the direct administration of income support policy within a federal public service agency. As discussed in detail in Chapter Four, this agency evolved into a key instrument for the delivery of NPM and welfare policy reforms. There is remarkably little scholarship, and even less empirical investigation reported in the Australian social work literature about the impact of NPM and welfare policy reforms on the social workers employed to implement these changes. However, there are some notable exceptions to this gap in the literature and these will be highlighted below.

In the year 2000 a special edition of the journal *Australian Social Work* was commissioned to explore the organisation and conceptualisation of social work in the emerging social, political, economic and cultural context. Catherine McDonald and Andrew Jones (2001, p. 3) were the lead authors in this collection and opened with a commentary about what they referred to as 'a pervading sense of uncertainty and concern regarding the future of social work' in the emerging neo-liberal environment in Australia. They summarised this uncertainty with reference to practitioners' stories of:

> losing ground to other professions and occupations, of role confusion and loss of identity, of increasingly competitive labour markets, of low pay, poor working conditions and limited career prospects, of unemployment and under-employment, of work intensification and of de-skilling [with] anecdotal evidence suggesting that social work in many organisations and fields of practice is facing increasing difficulty in maintaining its role and position (McDonald and Jones, 2001, p. 3).

In the same year, Ian O'Connor, Paul Smyth and Jeni Warburton canvassed views from a range of Australian policy and practice scholars for an edited collection, 'Social Work and the Human Services: Challenges and Change'*,* on the nature of changes facing those working in social work and human services in Australia. The editors of this collection opened the discussion with a statement that the reform process had led to institutional shifts that had 'reshaped the nature of social and community service workplaces, career structures and professional identities of social workers and other human service workers' (O'Connor, Warburton and Smyth, 2000, p. 1).

Contributions to this collection focus on both welfare policy and organisational reforms and identify fundamental challenges for service users related to issues of equity, and potential negative consequences including increased inequality, discrimination and uncertainty - all of which contribute to social marginalisation and dislocation (O'Connor et al. 2000, p. 5). The question posed by the editors of this collection was whether it is possible for social workers to work within the emerging practice environment and yet remain wedded to the profession's fundamental mission of social justice.

The responses from contributing scholars and practitioners to this collection incorporate a range of positions and suggestions including: embracing critical postmodern practices to identify and challenge power relations in order to guide emancipatory values of social justice (Jan Fook); moving away from a conventional social work practice paradigm of individualised professionalised services towards community–based alternatives (Jim Ife); actively adopting the stance of an 'enterprising' profession in order to engage with changes emerging within the competitive environment facing social work (Andrew Jones); moving beyond political and professional localism to apply knowledge and practices developed through internationalised social movements (Janet George), and developing organisational 'business' acumen to ensure that social work became a

'value adding' component of emerging human service organisational forms (Peta Fitzgibbon, with a focus on social work in the newly created organisation, Centrelink). Janet George, a contributor to this collection, summarised the essence of these responses in her statement: 'Social work is on the horns of a dilemma – whether to resist change by asserting its traditional identity, with the risk of irrelevancy, or whether to embrace a changed identity, perhaps losing the strengths of its heritage' (George, 2000, p. 169).

Social workers' own accounts of their experience of organisational and policy reforms

A limited number of empirical investigations of social workers' experiences of engagement with organisational and welfare policy reforms have been published. The following discussion draws on a selection of these studies to provide a flavour of social work scholars' accounts of the impact of reforms in a range of practice contexts.

Social workers implementing New Public Management reforms in Britain

A frequently cited British research study conducted by Chris Jones (2001) reports on findings from interviews he conducted with more than 40 experienced state social workers in the north of England over a two year period. The interviews sought feedback from social workers about what their jobs were like following the introduction of NPM policies and practices. Jones concluded from an analysis of these interviews that the work of social workers had become 'transformed and degraded' in diverse ways and that his respondents perceived that the needs of their clients had been largely ignored (C. Jones, 2001, p. 547).

Specifically, Jones (2001) identified seven key themes in his analysis of the interview data. The first theme related to the development of a working environment that had become highly regulated, creating what his respondents described as more routinised relationships with clients. Secondly, he found that social workers perceived a sense of regulatory intrusion arising from increased paperwork, form-filling and information technology requirements that had the effect of disciplining social workers to make assessments in prescribed, over-simplified and standardised ways. Thirdly, the social workers in his study talked about an increase in time limited and regulatory contacts with their clients. Fourthly, the responses demonstrated a perception amongst the social workers that welfare reform policies and budget cuts had created situations where clients were more distressed and in greater need than before. Fifthly, Jones identified a decline in the rehabilitative ideal and early intervention focus that was once considered to be a feature of state social work practice. His sixth finding was that social workers felt complicit in the rationing of services to people struggling to survive the impact of neo-liberal policies and practices. Finally, Jones found that the social workers in his study perceived a rising incidence of social work manager compliance with managerialism and the neo-liberal agenda.

A number of other research studies in Britain found similar levels of demoralisation amongst social workers during this time and concluded that social workers were beginning to lose the capacity to think critically about their workplace practices due to the policy and organisational pressures they confronted. For example, Karen Postle's doctoral research involved observations of, and interviews with, two teams of care managers to gauge their reactions to changed ways of working. Postle found that some of the social workers she interviewed in a study of care managers with older people coped with the inherent dissonance of their changing workplace roles by adopting a 'client processing mentality as a psychological adaptation' to their jobs (Postle, 2001, p. 20). In a similar vein Malcolm Carey, drawing on ethnographic research with care

managers across a number of health, disability and aged care services (Carey, 2003 and Carey, 2008) argues that the ideological thrust of neo-liberalism can 'penetrate common sense at a conscious and subconscious level to the point where it can become the only type or form of [analytical framework] from which to choose or identify with and understand' (Carey, 2008, p. 357).

The empirical studies referred to up to this point have focused primarily on the impact of neo-liberal influenced organisational changes on social work practice. The other major focus of interest to this study is the impact of welfare policy reform measures on the practice of social workers employed to implement these policy changes within specific workplace contexts.

Social workers administering welfare reform in Norway and Sweden

Social workers are employed in both Norway and Sweden to implement activation policy at the municipal level. Social workers in both countries were legally required at the time of the studies described below to evaluate every application for economic and social assistance within municipal boundaries by determining whether or not it was appropriate to require applicants to work for the economic benefit they were to receive, or to fulfil other specific conditions before support was granted.

Monica Kjørstad (2005) reported on a qualitative study she conducted in Norway of social workers implementing workfare policy in five municipal social welfare offices. Her study focused on conditions for social work practice in a bureaucratic context where clients applying for social and economic assistance are required to demonstrate their motivation to 'choose work rather than social insurance' (Kjørstad, 2005, p. 381). In short, Kjørstad found that many of the social workers

in her study reported an ethical dilemma when enforcing the requirement that clients enter into a contract that was not reciprocal. She discovered that there was substantial variation in the implementation of workfare policy by social workers, even within the same municipal administration. Kjørstad attributes this finding to 'the unclear rhetoric concerning the workfare policy [that] provides ample room for considerable variation in the use of discretion by individual social workers' (Kjørstad, 2005, p. 389). She identified the operation of ongoing ethical deliberation and autonomy amongst her social work respondents that remained possible because of the degree of professional discretion written into the policy informing social work practice. In her words (Kjørstad, 2005, pp. 392/393):

> The study supports the idea that the social workers in the study are loyal to the workfare policy *and* the idea that those social workers experience a considerable degree of freedom of action when implementing this policy. They often *take the bull by the horns* and use their freedom to make decisions that are based upon professional discretion in a very active way, most particularly, by *not* imposing conditions upon recipients of economic and social assistance. The social workers were able to express their respect for clients and, at the same time, they were able to demonstrate professional autonomy for employers and colleagues. Surprisingly, they did not give the impression of being *crushed* by the system [emphasis in the original].

In the context of Sweden, Katarina Thorén (2008) sought to understand how the social workers she interviewed and observed in practice in the municipal social service system translated activation policy into practice. Drawing on street level implementation theory (Lipsky, 1980), Thorén found that social workers 'produce' activation policy in their daily interactions with social assistance recipients, drawing on informal coping strategies in order to manage local workplace situations marked by ambiguous legislation, organisational pressures, limited resources, unlimited service demand, and little programme accountability (Thorén, 2008, p. 5). According to Thorén, social workers in her study based

their interventions, not on social work principles and formal activation policy to any great extent, but rather on informal normative assumptions about activation policy's target populations (Thorén, 2008, p. 143).

The case of Australia

According to Wallace and Pease (2011), while neo-liberalism's relationship to social work as a *broad* theme is explored in the Australian literature, the volume of published empirical research is slimmer than in other comparative countries. As a consequence, they argue the particularity of the Australian welfare state and its relationship to neo-liberalism, and the consequences for Australian social work, remains largely untested (Wallace and Pease, 2011, p. 132). The following discussion summarises the findings of the few Australian empirical studies that *are* documented in the literature, including one study that has particular relevance to the focus of this thesis.

Judith Burton and Diane van den Broek (2009) report on findings from two separate but related empirical studies they conducted in Australia during the years 2001 and 2002 that explore call centre casework in the statutory child protection field. The studies sought to find out whether managerial notions of accountability were changing the substantive nature of the work that caseworkers undertook in a first point of contact triage telephone call centre environment. Over the course of the two studies, 67 child protection workers were either interviewed or responded to survey questions. Many of the respondents reported that the managerial policies and practices embedded in public sector reforms and risk management requirements resulted in them having little discretion over the flow and volume of their case recording and service evaluation tasks. Related to this, research participants felt that the advent and proliferation of information management systems within the context of call centre triage work resulted in the collection and

collation of a wider range of client and service data by management that went beyond what was previously required for accountability purposes in social work case recording. In general terms, the respondents in this study felt that the data that was collected, notably statistical data, supported the managerial goal of quantifying output rather than measuring the quality of their work in this context.

Burton and van den Broek (2009, p. 1336) concluded that professional notions of accountability in this context were being subsumed by bureaucratic accountabilities. The authors argued that projected efficiency and increased organisational accountability arising from the introduction of these technologies challenged the view of professionalism held by the social workers interviewed. In addition, they reported that work had been intensified and that increasing requests for information reduced social workers' capacity to work with clients in ways that accorded with professional expertise and commitments.

The case of social work in Centrelink in Australia

Research conducted by Catherine McDonald and Lesley Chenoweth is of particular significance to this thesis. Their research, conducted between 2005 and 2006, focused on *Centrelink* and concerned itself with investigating the effects of the changing 'value spheres' of neo-liberalism and NPM on social work identities, practices and ethical frameworks (McDonald and Chenoweth 2009, p. 152). The authors conducted exploratory research involving the distribution of an electronic questionnaire to obtain information from Centrelink social workers' about their daily practices and experiences. This was followed-up by focus groups: two electronic and one face-to-face. A total of 82 Centrelink social workers across Australia responded to the online questionnaire.

The report of their analysis (McDonald and Chenoweth, 2009) identified six key themes arising from their study. Firstly, the authors argue that social work activities in Centrelink became incorporated over time into an organisational accountability framework that prioritised congruence with organisational goals and policy objectives over professional autonomy and discretion. Secondly, the social work participants in their study perceived a reduction in their capacity to undertake broader valued professional roles, including an active policy monitoring and feedback role and community development roles in the local service delivery system. Thirdly, they identified new forms of social work practice that relied on information and communication technologies, such as specialist roles in call centres. Fourthly, they found that some social workers were adopting the language of business unreflectively to conceptualise their relationships and interventions with services users. Fifthly, social work participants in their study identified value clashes and ethical dilemmas in their efforts to reconcile professional social justice commitments with the workfare policies they were required to implement. Finally, they found that some of their respondents attempted to re-frame the participation agenda so that it seemed congruent with the formal, theoretical and substantive rationalities of social work.

In summary, the McDonald and Chenoweth study provides evidence that Centrelink social workers perceived a disjuncture at the time of the study between a professional ethic of care, social citizenship rights and what they saw as an increasingly narrow focus on the government's participation agenda. The authors argue that organisational choices and decisions impacted upon the practices of Centrelink social workers, with a lessening of their ability to shape policy decisions. McDonald and Chenoweth's broader conclusion is that an engagement with the theoretical, formal and substantive rationalities of workfare and NPM is likely to have an impact on social workers, and perhaps on social work itself. The authors added - although they don't explore this in detail in this particular paper - their research found that social workers can and do exercise agency in

experiencing institutional change and in shaping the outcomes of policy and organisational reform (McDonald and Chenoweth, 2009, p. 159).

While McDonald and Chenoweth's study provides important insights into the contemporary dilemmas created for social workers by changes in the organisational and policy terrain, the nature and scope of their study means that the focus is on social work practices as *effects* of organisational and policy change. In other words, when social workers are asked about the impact of the changing practice environment, they are reporting on their experience of *completed processes* at the point in time they are questioned. As significant in the current context are the *processes* through which social workers *become*, or are *produced* in particular organisational and policy contexts. This focus on processes involves attending to the operation of a series of actions directed towards achieving a specified purpose. In the case of the study for this thesis, it will be argued that these processes are focused on engaging the responsiveness of social workers as public servants towards the implementation of contested welfare policy reforms. These processes, I argue, require attention to techniques of governance and questions of identity and regulation.

Theorising social work engagement with organisational and policy reforms

A recurring theme in the studies highlighted so far is a general sense of alienation and disappointment amongst the collective social work profession resulting from the imposition of what is perceived to be a destructive form of managerial logic into social work practice. As discussed earlier in the chapter, this experience of alienation arises from a perceived gap between collective social work ideals and the regulations and related limitations imposed upon individual social workers engaged in organisational life.

It could be argued that many of the studies identified so far in this chapter have conceptualised social workers as mostly passive recipients of the discourses of change, reacting to a given organisational and policy model imposed upon them. Susan Halford (2003, p. 287) offers a different reading of the gap between professional ideals and organisational realities in her argument that:

> rather than seeing institutional change as…something that happens to people who remain essentially the same as the world changes around them, [policy and organisational reform] entails or even requires the transformation of individual identities.

Halford (2003, p. 288) suggests that the gap between required workplace performance and individual identities reveals complex processes of negotiation and resistance and stable, as well as shifting identifications. Her analysis attends to the ways in which required performances are acquired, modified and resisted by individuals. Halford emphasises agency, resistance and personal politics as keys to understanding micropolitics in the everyday practice of power and engagement in workplace politics.

Exploring social work resistance within organisations

A similar approach to analysis has been taken up by John Harris and Vicki White in their edited collection *Modernising Social Work: Critical Considerations*, in a questioning of the assertion that neo-liberalism is now 'indelibly inscribed on the consciousness of service users, social workers and managers' (Harris and White, 2009, p. 170). Instead, they suggest:

> An alternative is to see service users, social workers and managers as interpellated by the neo-liberal agenda, being called to its modernising

discourses and to the adoption of specific identities within it. However, social workers, and others, may be called by the neo-liberal agenda but may not respond to the call, or may respond to it in ways that are not anticipated. They may be *subjected to* the modernisation discourse but not *subjected by* it. The *intentions* of modernising social work should not be mistaken for unequivocal *accomplishments* (Harris and White, 2009, p. 170) [emphasis in the original].

Vicki White, in another chapter in the same collection (White, 2009), responds to the claim that social workers have been turned into 'unreflective people-processors' by waves of managerialism in her argument that opportunities exist for 'quiet challenges' as social workers 'go about their day-to-day work in the discretionary spaces social work provides' (White, 2009, p. 129). White talks about the continuing existence of professional discretion as offering 'spaces for resistance'. These spaces, according to White, are constructed by social work's location as a 'state mediated profession and the duties social workers perform on behalf of the state, within that location' (White, 2009, p. 130). Thus, she is suggesting that while managerialism is central to the modernisation agenda, it is possible to interrupt and disturb it at some points due to discretionary spaces made available within policy design. This is consistent with research findings highlighted earlier in this chapter that suggest social workers can still act upon and shape policy operationally through their use of discretion.

Post-structuralist feminist understandings of resistance within organisations have been important in the theorisation of the relationship between subjectivity and resistance. Robyn Thomas and Annette Davies (2005) for example, argue that:

a narrative of deprofessionalisation and commodification of social work practice…with little evidence of any reaction other than that of resigned compliance and resignation seems unsatisfactory on the grounds that it fails

to appreciate agency and difference within and between social work professionals/managers (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 723).

Based on their own study of social workers and social work managers, the authors argue that there is a need for a broader, more diverse, complex and multifaceted appreciation of resistance as a consequence of a shift from viewing resistance within a framework of a 'grand narrative of revolution' to one of 'quiet challenge' (Thomas and Davies, 2005, p. 714). Drawing on du Gay (1996) they suggest that NPM operates as an *identity project*. This leads them to an interest in the ways in which the discourse and discursive practices of NPM are received, negotiated and constructed within regulated organisational life.

Julia Evetts (2009, p. 255) extends earlier analyses of normative control of organisational identities in her argument that there is now a new and distinctive variant of professionalism that she terms *new public management* professionalism. Evetts coins this term in recognition of specific elements and characteristics that go beyond the organisational and occupational ideal types of professionalism outlined in an earlier section of this chapter. According to Evetts (2009, p. 255), this NPM ideal type variant of professionalism emphasises among other things the re-creation of professionals *themselves* as managers. This conceptualisation provides a useful starting point for exploring the engagement of social workers as public servants in organisational and policy reforms.

Evetts (2009, p. 255) suggests:

> The control of professionals in public services is to be achieved by means of normative values and self-regulated motivation. The discourse of enterprise is fitted alongside the language of quality and customer care and then also the ideologies of empowerment, innovation, autonomy and discretion. The

NPM variant of professionalism also includes a discourse of individualisation and competition, whereby individual performance is linked to the success or failure of the organisation. These elements and characteristics introduce powerful mechanisms of worker/employee control in which the occupational values of professionalism are used to promote efficient organisational management.

This perspective on organisational change and regulation describes an effort, through workplace practices to create synergy between neo-liberal inspired organisational and policy discourses and generic professional values in order to capture the commitment of professionals within public services and then to measure their performance against these professed values. Many of the normative values identified by Evetts are broadly consistent with the codified professed values of the collective social work profession. The question then becomes, how might such values be appropriated by organisational practices underpinned by managerial logic to make visible, measure and evaluate the performance of social workers within specific contexts of practice?

Work on regulation and resistance developed in the broader field of organisational studies provides some important conceptual tools for apprehending these kinds of processes. The following sections provide a discussion of two key ways of thinking about the relationship between individuals and organisations that have been developed. The first is the process of the 'regulation of identity', an idea developed by Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott (and others) to describe how organisational subjects are produced through *identity work*. The second is a process of the 'regulation of professional performances', which conceptualises organisational life in terms of *performativity*. It is suggested that both of these theoretical developments may be able to shed light on the *processes,* rather than *effects,* of social workers' engagement with the reforming state.

Organisational regulation of identity

Mats Alvesson and Hugh Willmott (2002, p. 622) propose a useful perspective on identity construction in their theorising about the different means of pursuing control within work organisations through the regulation of identity. Alvesson and Willmott explore the means by which employees are 'enjoined to develop self-images and work orientations that are deemed congruent with managerially defined objectives' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 619). Drawing on research within the organisational fields of quality management, service management, innovation and knowledge work, they illustrate how managerial intervention operates:

> more or less intentionally and in/effectively, to influence employees' self-constructions in terms of coherence, distinctiveness and commitment. The processual nature of such control is emphasised…it exists in tension with other intra and extra-organisational claims upon employees' sense of identity in a way that can open a space for forms of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 619).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 622) theorise self-identity as:

> a repertoire of structured narrations…sustained through identity work in which regulation is accomplished by selectively, but not necessarily reflectively, adopting practices and discourses that are more or less intentionally targeted at the insides – the hopes, fears and aspirations - of workers (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 620).

In essence, Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 623) propose an understanding of identity construction as: 'a process in which the role of discourse in targeting and

moulding the human subject is balanced with other elements of life history forged by a capacity reflexively to accomplish life projects out of various sources of influence and inspiration'. In a later publication with another colleague (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009) the authors add that it is important to go beyond subjectivity when studying organisational resistance, to focus on the interaction between discourse and material aspects of an organisation. In their words:

> [In our research] we emphasize the level of discourse without necessarily reducing the operations of power and compliance to this level. We think the structural, economic and ideological context of [the organisation] is important to bear in mind – formal hierarchies, surveillance and reward/sanctions of a material nature certainly interact with discourses (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2009, pp. 1121/1122].

In making a related point, Stanley Deetz (2003, p. 35) asserts that efforts to control workers within organisations increasingly go beyond the instrumental exercise of disciplinary power through control of behaviours, to focusing on the management of employees' 'insides'; meaning their values, commitments, identifications and motivations. According to Deetz (2003, p. 36) the willing assent of employees is engineered through the production of the normalcy of their specific beliefs and practices.

Alvesson and Willmott (2003, p. 190/191) draw upon this analysis to argue that the exercise of power within organisations is then about:

> the development of subjects tied to particular identities regarding how one should feel, think and act. By defining who a person is or what he or she should be like and indicating deviations from the ideal, the person is regulated and the thinking and feeling become effects of the exercise of

power. This of course depends upon the person being regulated accepting the definition and the norms involved.

Regulating professional performances

The concept of *performativity* appears to provide another useful conceptual lens for exploring processes in the production of professional identities within regulated organisational life. The concept of performativity was originally developed in 1962 in the field of linguistics by J.L. Austin who used the term 'performative utterances' to describe statements that go beyond passively describing a given reality to changing the social reality they are describing (Austin, 1962, p. 5). More recently this concept has been applied to, and extended within, the fields of gender studies (Butler, 1990; Brickell, 2005); education (Blackmore, 2004, Blackmore and Thomson, 2004, Meadmore and Meadmore, 2004, Usher, 2006, Sachs and Blackmore, 2007, Stronach, Corbin, McNamara, Stark and Warne, 2010), and critical organisational studies (Spicer, Alvesson and Kärreman, 2009). The concept of performativity has been applied to explore questions of ontology within these fields – specifically, iterative, regulatory and social processes of *coming into being* within particular contexts. This approach to thinking about identity has been taken up by theorists across a range of disciplines who have an interest in analysing emergent management and professional discourses and their influence on the identities of a broad range of professional workers within different contexts.

One effort to advance this theoretical and conceptual development within the field of educational sociology and policy comes from Stephen Ball who draws on an articulation of performativity by Jean-François Lyotard (1984). In simple terms, Ball talks about performativity as being about 'how we value each other and

ourselves' (Ball, 2011). In more detailed terms, Stephen Ball (2003, p. 216) describes performativity as:

> a technology, a culture and a mode of regulation that employs judgements, comparisons and displays as means of incentive, control, attrition and change based on rewards and sanctions (both material and symbolic). The performances (of individual subjects or organisations) serve as measures of productivity or output, or displays of 'quality', or 'moments' of promotion or inspection. As such they stand for, encapsulate or represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a field of judgement. The issue of who controls the field of judgement is crucial… Who is it that determines what is to count as a valuable, effective or satisfactory performance and what measures or indicators are considered valid?

Ball (2003, p. 221) adds that workers and organisations are not only subject to evaluations in relation to externally prescribed performance indicators - evaluations from '*the outside-in*' - but performativity also works from the '*inside-out*'. In this sense, Ball argues that there is an 'emotional status dimension' to performative regimes as well as a social and interpersonal dimension.

Why a focus on identity?

This study will explore the usefulness of the concept of performativity as a framework for understanding and explaining processes of constructing and securing social work identity within a corporatised public service agency with a mandate to implement contested welfare reform measures. The rationale for focusing on the notion of 'identity' – essentially, questions of '*who am I?*' – is that it has important consequences for the priorities, motivations, and actions of social workers faced with major personal and professional challenges in changing public sector workplaces. Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 620) suggest that

identity as a concept is problematic within current scholarship 'and yet so crucial to how and what one values, thinks, feels and does in all social domains, including organisations'.

Judith Butler argues that identity is not an essentialising mode of thinking about difference or a fixed entity but rather a *process* in the production of selves as effects (Butler, 1990, p.139). This perspective leads to a theoretical premise that identities have a temporal performative nature, suggesting the significance of exploring the ways in which 'identities continue to be produced, embodied and performed, effectively, passionately and with social and political consequence' (Bell 1999, p. 2). In this sense, identity is a reflexive process in that we negotiate our various identities continuously in response to day-to-day affirmations, reinforcements and enactments of difference (Finkelstein and Goodwin, 2005, p. 143).

Chapter review:

This chapter situated the study for this thesis within a body of scholarship that focuses on shifting constructions of professional identity within regulated organisational life. The discussion began with a review of literature that examines existing understandings of the impact of NPM and welfare policy reforms on social workers within public welfare services in Australia and beyond. Many of these accounts paint a picture of a compliant and complicit social work profession in decline, due to a perceived inability to preserve social work values, ethics and commitments in the face of managerial prerogatives and increasingly punitive welfare policy regimes.

Many of the highlighted studies reported that social workers had become *either* disillusioned and passive *or* actively committed to the individualisation and

activation discourses underpinning neo-liberal inspired contextual reforms. A smaller proportion of accounts argued that social workers continue to hold on to a level of agency, autonomy and discretion in their daily interaction with organisational practices and in their implementation of activation policies. It was argued that existing accounts focus on social workers and their practices as *effects* of changing practice environments. The research for this thesis seeks to extend the current boundaries of understanding about social work responses to managerial imperatives underpinning the reforming state through a more nuanced focus on *processes* by which social workers *become* or by which they are *produced* in their daily engagement with organisational and welfare policy reforms.

In later chapters (Chapters Five and Six), empirical material generated for this thesis will be analysed in order to investigate efforts to regulate professional performances within a specific regime of performativity and to identify the resultant identity work undertaken by social workers employed within the Australian Public Service agency *Centrelink*. This approach to analysis seeks to go beyond a focus on the *effects* of reform on social workers to extend ways of understanding *processes* of social work engagement with the reforming state. For the purposes of this study, Stephen Ball's definition of 'performativity' will be operationalised in order to explore and understand material and symbolic regulatory processes within Centrelink and responses to these efforts by a particular cohort of social workers. The regulatory processes of particular interest to this study relate to the operation of actions directed towards engaging the responsiveness of social workers as public servants in their daily administration of contested welfare policy reforms. Chapter Three follows and is concerned with approaches taken to obtaining and analysing empirical material for this study. Chapter Three ends with a statement of specific research questions developed to guide the empirical component of this study.

CHAPTER THREE: Research approach and research questions

Introduction

Chapter Three outlines a research study design that explores the processual nature of social work engagement with the reforming state in Australia. This study seeks to move beyond a 'muscular' substantive or bureaucratic approach to organisational regulation (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2004, p.151) to pose questions about the subjective experience of social work identity formation within the context of regulated organisational life. Specifically this study develops a framework for investigating processes of social work engagement with public service governance and service delivery reforms and welfare policy reforms in Australia during the period 1997 to the close of 2007. The study will analyse empirical material to explore understandings of the way social workers responded to performative expectations to demonstrate their value to Centrelink within a policy and practice environment that became increasingly hostile to the collective professional commitments of social work. This chapter ends with the articulation of specific research questions guiding the empirical study for this thesis.

Motivations for conducting this study – the puzzled researcher

According to Alvesson and Kärreman (2007a, p. 1266), it is the unanticipated and the unexpected – 'the things that puzzle the researcher' – that are of particular interest in the development and pursuit of a research project. In the case of this study, the initial motivation for conducting research about social work responses to regulated organisational life came out of my own experience as a social worker in Centrelink in the early years of the evolution of this public service agency. I was employed as a social worker in the field of income support for sixteen years

between 1984 and 2000 so I was actively involved in the transition from the DSS as a traditional public service department to Centrelink as a corporatised public service agency, during the years 1996 to 2000. During this time I experienced many puzzling personal reactions to various elements of organisational and policy change, particularly early efforts to introduce corporate principles into a public service agency that was at the frontline of administering a rapidly changing welfare reform agenda. I struggled to comprehend the diverse range of responses to these changes by social work and non-social work colleagues during those early years of organisational and policy transformation.

I continued to maintain professional and personal relationships with Centrelink social workers after leaving the agency and I found myself being carried along with their enthusiasms and disappointments at critical moments of organisational and policy change. These ongoing professional and personal relationships gave me access to a diverse range of views about the opportunities and challenges confronting social workers in this evolving practice landscape. Some social workers I spoke to appeared to enthusiastically embrace corporate principles and/or aspects of emerging welfare reform discourses while others despaired about their capacity to be the type of social worker they wanted to be in this corporatised public service agency. I found that what was viewed as a productive new involvement by some social workers was seen as ideological anathema to others.

I was particularly puzzled by the complexity and changeability of individual social worker's responses over time. Some of the social workers who were previously resistant to changes became energetically engaged in specific organisational projects that seemed to be inconsistent with their professed personal and professional values and commitments. My own puzzled reactions provided the impetus to try to make sense of the material and symbolic processes

social workers engaged with during this period of significant organisational and policy transformation.

Centrelink as a case study organisation for this study

Carey (2009, p. 92) describes the rationale behind case study research as 'seeking to identify and then explore a determined case at depth and in detail…so as to understand and appreciate the characteristics or unique qualities embodied within'. This study focuses on relationships and processes within a particular social setting over a specific period of time and looks at some level of depth at the complexities of the phenomena under investigation. Centrelink was chosen as a case study site of social work practice because the organisation is unique in many ways, not just in Australia but internationally. Australia is one of a very small number of countries that employs social workers directly within a public service agency to support the administration of income support and employment services policy[6].

Centrelink as a public service agency is also unique because it was required to re-make itself under the pressure of performative expectations and within a context of potential contestability into an organisation where market-oriented values are overlaid on top of a more traditional public service ethos to form a hybridised entity (Stewart, 2006). The building-blocks for this transformation included the inculcation of a new set of prescribed values and orientations for the public servants employed in this hybridised public service agency, many of whom had been recruited in earlier times when administrative skills, rather than an orientation to the wellbeing of service users was most valued. It will be argued in this thesis that this transformation into a hybrid corporatised public service agency

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[6] As discussed in the previous chapter, social workers are employed in both Norway and Sweden to implement workfare policy at the (government) municipal level.

required a re-orientation of both organisational identity and individual staff member identity as well as the redesign of organisational infrastructure, all in the context of the rapidly changing set of politically inspired welfare reform discourses and practices outlined in Chapter One.

The social work service within Centrelink is also in an interesting position because social workers in designated positions form a tiny minority of the workforce – around 550, or 0.02% of a total national workforce of 27,000 in 2007. Social work is also in a minority within Centrelink in that professional qualifications are mandatory for the performance of the occupational role[7]. In addition to having a relatively small physical presence within the organisation, social work in Centrelink is located within a secondary setting in that the core function of the organisation is focused on the administration of income support policy, employment risk profiling and referral to specialist employment services, rather than on the broader welfare of its service users (Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves, 2001). This means that social workers face specific opportunities and challenges when working with frontline administrative staff and managers who do not have the training or organisational mandate to address the broad and complex wellbeing issues confronting people who seek assistance from Centrelink.

Life at the frontline for social workers in the field of income support

There are very few published practice-based accounts of social work in the field of income support – a deficit this thesis seeks to redress. One explanation for this is that social workers employed in public service settings are subject to codes of conduct that restrict what employees can say about government policy in the

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[7] Centrelink has employed a range of additional professional allied health workers since July 2005, including psychologists, occupational therapists, physiotherapists and registered nurses in a position called *Job Capacity Assessors* (JCAs) to assess entitlement to disability and carer payments and related services. Social workers are also employed in these positions but they do not retain the occupational title 'social worker' while performing this role.

public domain. One key source of information about social work in this field of practice is a chapter by two Centrelink social work managers, Peta Fitzgibbon and Desley Hargreaves in an edited collection by Alston and McKinnon (2001) called *Social Work: Fields of Practice.* In this chapter, Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves canvass the history of the social work service and cautiously outline the potential ethical challenges confronting social workers in their duty to implement welfare reform policies (Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves, 2001). Another important practice-based analysis of social work in this field comes from Cathie Peut (2000), a frontline Centrelink social worker whose writing was referred to above. Peut explains that a primary focus of much of the social work casework in the field of income support practice involves 'the deployment of complex and changing social policy knowledge within crisis situations, with people for whom basic survival is a fundamental issue' (Peut, 2000, p. 51).

Lynn Froggett (1996, p. 120) refers to social workers employed in traditional public service 'rule-bound bureaucracies' as being 'enmeshed in chains of hierarchical command which are highly prescriptive in terms of division of labour, procedures and delegations'. She describes social workers in such contexts as 'bureau-professionals' whose role it is to mediate between disadvantaged service users and the state, based on an ethical stance underpinned by the ideal of public service and universalistic notions of public welfare.

Four layers of intersecting change

This study seeks to explore the ways Centrelink social workers understood and responded to four layers of intersecting change over a period of more than ten years. The broader period of time under investigation for this study begins nominally with the election of the Howard-led Coalition government in March 1996 and ends in early 2008 during the early term of the new Rudd-led Labor government. This was a period of unprecedented organisational and welfare

policy reform that was underpinned by an explicit Federal Liberal-National Coalition government agenda to transform and modernise the Australian public service and the income support and employment services policy system.

The four intersecting layers of change that form the context for this empirical study include: public service governance and organisational design changes; income support and employment services policy reforms; Centrelink service-wide workplace changes; and changing expectations of social workers within Centrelink. Specifically, these layers of change include the following:

Public service governance and organisational design changes:

The empirical component of this study begins in Chapter Four with a brief focus on the Department of Social Security (DSS) in the period before 1997 to set the scene for the transition from a traditional public service bureaucracy to a corporatised public service agency. The period between early 1997 and the end of 2004 saw dramatic changes to organisational design as Centrelink was compelled to transform relatively quickly into an enterprising public service agency with a significantly different organisational design and focus. These changes were underpinned by a new governance structure and service delivery principles explicitly drawn from private enterprise. Sue Vardon, an influential and energetic chief executive officer with a social work background led these changes until the close of 2004 when she resigned from her position following a governance overhaul.

The period between early 2005 and the end of 2007 was the most dramatic for welfare reform. The end of this period saw the deliberate unravelling of many aspects of the corporatised public service model that characterised the earlier years of Centrelink. In essence, the organisation completed a cycle of change that

resulted in a return to elements of a traditional public service design in order to manage public service implementation of an increasingly stringent activation agenda (Halligan and Wills, 2008). The study ends with the election of a Labor government that came to office with a pledge to focus on social inclusion as a key principle underpinning welfare reform.

Income support and employment service policy:

As discussed in Chapter One, reforms initiated by a Labor government commissioned *Social Security Review* in 1986 resulted in the adoption of 'active' elements within income support programmes, mainly in terms of linking receipt of payments for people who were unemployed to access to work assistance measures, such as training and job placement assistance. The principle of 'activation' evolved and intensified over time, becoming increasingly stringent with the adoption by the Howard Coalition government of principles of 'mutual obligation' and 'social and economic participation' – both key components of the *Australians Working Together* agenda (McDonald and Marston, 2006). The Government's *Welfare to Work* policy framework intensified the activation agenda further in 2006 with increasingly punitive compliance measures for a broader range of income support recipients, including the selected introduction of income management interventions (Yeend and Dow, 2007).

Centrelink service-wide workplace changes:

The study explores a period of time in which Centrelink employees were expected to adopt an enterprising approach to administering welfare policy reforms (Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves, 2001; Halligan and Wills, 2008). These expectations formed the basis of a performance assessment process that provided material and symbolic rewards to Centrelink employees, including social workers, for their

commitment to achieving organisational objectives and values. The study seeks to understand the approach taken by the Centrelink *National Social Work Service team*, based in Canberra and headed by the National Director of Social Work, to interpret and transmit these performative expectations and related discourses to the social workers across Australia within a context of rapidly shifting organisational change and welfare reform agendas.

Changing expectations of social workers within Centrelink

The fourth layer of change explored in this study relates to the discourses that gave meaning to changing expectations of social workers in Centrelink and the way these discourses were understood and responded to by social workers at the frontline of the organisation. To summarise, the study focuses on the following themes:

- The changing context of public service organisational design and social work practice in the income support and employment services field;

- Welfare reform policy directions and their interaction with service delivery approaches;

- The ways in which the nationally dispersed social work service within Centrelink engaged with major changes to the policy environment and organisational transformation; and,

- Understandings of and responses by individual social workers to the changing practice landscape.

Research design:

This study analysed empirical material in order to improve understandings of how required organisational performances within Centrelink impacted upon individual social worker's construction of identity in a seemingly hostile policy and practice environment. In order to address this broad aim, this study applied a number of methods to obtain and analyse rich empirical material relating to identity and regulation of professional performances in the workplace.

Constructing a timeline of performative moments

The first step in this study involved the construction from primary documents of a timeline of 'performative moments' in public service management and welfare policy reform in order to inform the design of this research. The study uses the term _performative_ moments to designate something that is different to _historical_ moments. The concept of 'performative moments' refers here to what Usher (2006, p. 286) refers to as 'a space where signs are transmitted (produced) and received (consumed)'. These moments transcend a benign transmission of information about change to herald accounts that seek to influence the commitment and performance of key agents in the process of reform.

This brings together two aspects of change referred to in the previous chapter that are of particular interest to this study: efforts to produce social workers as organisational subjects through identity work, and related to this, efforts to regulate social work performances within a specific organisational context. This timeline became a useful resource for developing knowledge about four key transitional moments in the account of change, namely: pre-1997 as a launching point for investigating change; 1997 to late 2004, as a period of significant _organisational_ change; 2005-2007 as a period of intensive _welfare_ reform, and

the early months following the election of a new Labor government in 2008 that heralded a re-focusing of welfare reform principles. Sources of information for this timeline came from a range of published and unpublished documents, including:

- My own DSS and Centrelink work diaries to the close of 1999, which contain notes on what seemed like significant events and issues in the early days of organisational reform;

- Published speeches by government ministers and heads of relevant portfolios that relate to the organisational context of Centrelink or evolving welfare policy;

- Published speeches by Sue Vardon, the Chief Executive Officer of Centrelink for the first eight years of its existence that provide a narrative about the evolution of the corporatised public service agency throughout that time[8];

- Published speeches by other Centrelink Board members and unpublished documents developed by senior Centrelink programme managers about key points of organisational or welfare policy change;

- Published articles and unpublished memos from Centrelink Social Work National Managers, that provide accounts of service-wide social work responses to the changing policy and practice terrain;

- DSS and Centrelink social work documents, including publications by frontline Centrelink social workers, planning documents provided to me by key informants, internal administrative memos and de-identified personal correspondence from frontline social workers;

- Published DSS and Centrelink annual reports between 1996 and 2008.

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[8] The presentations and publications by Sue Vardon and other members of the Board were catalogued and archived on the Centrelink News Room website until the CEO's departure in late 2004. At that point they were conspicuously removed, presumably as a form of 'house-clearing' at a time of significant organisational regime change. Each of the documents had been transcribed and analysed as data for this study before their removal from the Centrelink website.

This timeline made it possible to chart a history of Centrelink's performative moments over more than ten years, along with documented responses to changes from members of the Executive, senior Centrelink programme managers, senior social work managers and social workers at the frontline of organisational and policy change. This document became an important resource for structuring interview questions with social work participants (to be discussed below).

Reviewing Centrelink 'performative texts'

In the process of researching and constructing a timeline for this study, I came across a series of published speeches by members of the Centrelink Executive that appear to have been constructed as 'performative texts' (Hacking, 1986, p. 231, cited in Ball, 2000, p.1). This term is employed by Stephen Ball to describe the way in which organisational texts can play their part in 'making us up…by providing new modes of description and new possibilities for action, thus creating new social identities' (Ball, 2000, p.2). Ball, along with a number of colleagues returned to this theme in a more recent study that focuses on the way schools in the United Kingdom attempt to demonstrate their distinctiveness and construct their 'outstanding' status in a competitive environment through artefacts of promotion and marketing (Maguire, Perryman, Ball and Braun, 2011, p.1). Their study argues that an organisation, in deploying such performative texts attempts to persuade multiple audiences of the virtues that mark it out as distinctive and in doing so, simultaneously performs itself through various representations (Maguire et al., 2011, p.1).

One source of empirical material explored in this study is a series of speeches and conference papers delivered by Sue Vardon (CEO of Centrelink between 1997 and 2004) and her Executive colleagues. These speeches and publications function as vehicles for narratives in the public domain about the evolving

organisation as an identity and a brand within a context of contestability in which Centrelink was required to 'make itself-up' in readiness to compete with 'for-profit' and 'not-for-profit' organisations for the business of government. These texts provide an interesting source of empirical material for analysing regulatory processes that seek to engage the commitment and loyalty of a broad constituency of stakeholders, including: government funders (known as 'client departments[9]'); Centrelink employees at all levels; service users, and external human service providers. Specifically, this material was analysed to explore the following questions:

- How did Centrelink publicly define and promote its organisational identity and performative expectations to client departments, employees, service users and the general public?

- What operational strategies were employed by Centrelink in an effort to regulate the performance of its public service employees, including social workers?

Interviews with social workers in Centrelink

The aim of this study is to understand the experience of a cohort of social workers in Centrelink whose accounts of change over a ten-year period is a key source of empirical material. The study sought to capture the experience of social workers who participated in the transition from one form of public service organisation to another during a specific period of time. Social workers with more than ten years experience in the organisation were invited to participate in the study to discuss their understandings of, and responses to organisational change and welfare policy reform during the period under investigation. Citing Andrew Pithouse (1998),

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[9] A term used to designate the government agencies that purchased services from Centrelink.

Chris Jones suggests that social workers with this amount of experience warrant the title 'veteran' because few social workers remain in frontline positions in state social work, at least in the UK, for more than five years (Jones, 2001, p. 548/549).

Preparing for the interviews – early 2008

The first step in the process of preparing for the interviews with social workers involved a meeting with Peter Humphries, the acting National Manager of Social Work Services, at the Centrelink National Office in Canberra. The purpose of this meeting was to explain the details of the study and to seek formal organisational permission to conduct the research. I sent a letter in preparation for this meeting with details of the proposed study – see Appendix 1 '*Information for Centrelink'*. A meeting was scheduled for early 2008 and Peter provided consent for me to record our discussion. Peter was generous in allowing me to draw on these discussions as an additional source of information to supplement the accounts provided by frontline social workers. Peter was a key source of information about details of change at the National Social Work network level. In addition, Peter provided important insights about social work management strategies for interpreting and representing change processes in a strategic way for the information of frontline social workers.

Selection of social work participants

After receiving formal permission from the National Social Work Service to conduct the study, I interviewed ten social workers who had been employed by DSS/Centrelink for a continuous period of ten years or more. This employment history equipped the potential participants to draw upon their experience of participation in the transition from one organisational form to another. An additional consideration for focusing on the narratives of social workers with

significant work experience in Centrelink was their potential value as 'storytellers' in the organisation. This amount of work experience means that participants in the study were able to reflect on ways the organisation dealt with issues in the past and to offer some continuity and ideas about how to respond to the present (Inkson and Kolb, 1995).

The sample size was arrived at following consideration of the aims of the study that included examining at some depth the complexities of the phenomena I was researching. As this is an exploratory study that sought rich narrative accounts, it was considered appropriate to limit the sample size to ten social workers. It was considered that to interview a larger number of social workers would have made it difficult to do justice to the complexity of the interview material.

Recruitment of study participants

Participants were enlisted for the study by sending written information about the project as an attachment to an electronic mail message to Desley Hargreaves, the returned National Manager of Social Work Services. Desley agreed to forward the information and an invitation to participate to the 'Business Managers' of Social Work Services in each of the administrative support regions of Centrelink in NSW, the ACT and Queensland, for distribution to social workers. The invitation to participate asked Centrelink social workers to contact me directly to obtain further information about the study before making a commitment to participate. A copy of the '*Invitation to participate in a research study'* can be found at Appendix 3.

I decided on this approach rather than recruiting social workers directly to ensure that potential participants did not feel coerced or obligated to participate. While

the Centrelink social work service is relatively large and geographically dispersed, there is a close network of professional relationships amongst social workers which made it possible that I would have met social workers over the years who were potentially qualified to participate in this study. I was contacted by ten social workers within one week of sending the request to participate. I spoke to each potential participant when they contacted me by telephone to provide further information about the study and to address questions they had before sending out two documents: *Information for Centrelink* (Appendix 2) and a *participant consent* form (Appendix 4).

Location of interviews

All participants chose to be interviewed in their workplaces and they generously committed to making themselves available for the interview without interruption except in situations of service user or staff member crisis. The duration of the interviews ranged from around eighty minutes to a just over two hours, with breaks where required.

Ethical considerations

A number of ethical considerations took priority in the development and conduct of the social work interviews. The study takes seriously the ethical requirements outlined in the Australian Association of Social Work *Code of Ethics* (AASW, 2010), specifically aspects outlined in section 5.5.2 – *'Responsibilities in particular contexts: research'* (pp. 36-37). Formal permission to conduct this study was obtained in October 2007 from the University of Sydney *Human Research Ethics Committee* based on detailed assurances about the ethical conduct of the study.

It was necessary for me to provide strong reassurance to participants about matters of privacy and confidentiality at each stage of the research process. The issue of protecting the identity of individual social workers was paramount in this case because I continue to maintain friendships with a number of Centrelink social workers across the network. I made a commitment to each participant to be scrupulous in avoiding disclosure of information about her or his identity in casual conversations with other social workers and steps were taken to ensure that I did not unintentionally disclose information of any sort about the interviews to other people who could identity the participants.

Each participant was asked to nominate a pseudonym for use throughout the interview, analysis and documentation of the study. Participants were assured that all empirical material would be reported in any publications and conference presentations in ways that did not identify individual participants or their workplace locations. Non-identifying information and empirical material, including original digital disc recordings of interviews and typed transcripts of interviews are held in a locked filing cabinet. All electronic records of interviews are held in a password-protected computer.

The nature of this inquiry raised a potential concern about the sensitivity of issues covered in the interviews. Participants were asked throughout the interviews to draw on memories about their workplace experiences over a period of more than ten years. I was aware that this process of reflection and recollection had the potential to cause some level of distress to participants given the challenging nature of the social work role in this field of practice. This did not turn out to be the case as far as I was aware, other than mild expressions of frustration when participants failed to recall aspects of their experience. In fact, laughter sometimes accompanied and vivified recollections as participants were guided through the various periods of change.

It was particularly important for me to be aware that participants were working within a potentially contestable practice environment at the time of the interviews and that there were concerns at times throughout the period under investigation about the continuing employment of social workers within the organisation. I was also conscious from my own social work practice experience in DSS/Centrelink of the need to respect social workers' rights to maintain a level of discretion within and without the organisation when disclosing issues of professional strategy.

Interview framework

This interview component of the study set out to explore the influence of emerging discourses, cultures and practices on the way social workers within Centrelink constructed and negotiated personal and professional identities within a regulated public service workplace. The study focused on performative aspects of identity as well as other ways in which regulation was pursued within the changing organisation through intentional efforts to regulate workplace performances. The study began from an assumption that the complex and multi-faceted concept of 'identity' has important consequences for the motivations, priorities and actions of social workers who are challenged in their role as public servants to balance a codified requirement to implement policy of the government of the day[10] with codified professional social work ethics and commitments[11]. To this end, the study explored strategies adopted by Centrelink social workers in their daily engagement with the micropolitics of their workplaces.

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[10] Documented within the Australian Public Service Act.
[11] Documented within the Australian Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics.*

In order to address this broad aim, the interviews with social workers aimed to explore the following research questions:

- What discourses gave meaning to changing expectations of social workers in Centrelink throughout the period under investigation?

- What criteria did Centrelink social workers perceive the organisation used to judge their worth and value at different periods during the decade spanning 1997 to the close of 2007?

- How did social workers respond to and reshape dominant constructions of their identities within Centrelink?

- How did individual social workers assess their own personal and professional value within this context of organisational and policy change?

Interviews with frontline social workers in Centrelink

In total, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted with frontline social work participants across ten sites of practice. An interview framework was constructed that attempted to strike a balance between eliciting narratives from social workers about their workplace experiences and exploring the specific areas of interests in this study that related to performative aspects of social work identity. This required attention to balancing elements of narrative with prompting to follow-up specific issues of relevance.

An interview schedule was constructed from the timeline of performative moments for Centrelink described above that served to guide participants through a decade or more of significant organisational and policy change – see '*Interview Schedule*' at Appendix 5. Rather than ask participants direct questions about specific changes that may have meant little to them, the study identified key moments from the literature review that warranted investigation and open questions were posed that allowed participants to talk about their memories of experiences at that particular time. In doing so, the interview schedule encouraged participants to provide a narrative account of change centred within their own experiences at key points of time.

Epistemological considerations

This study pursues understandings of the ways social workers engage in the process of interpreting themselves in daily organisational life. Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p.3) stress that research cannot treat people's own accounts as unproblematic because this 'flies in the face of what is known about people's less clear-cut, more confused and contradictory relationships to knowing and telling about themselves'. Questions of what something means to someone are hard to quantify and difficult to explore. In real life, people engage in meaning making through reflexive dialogue where they have an opportunity to explore ideas, think aloud, question, disagree, bring in counter examples, interpret and notice hidden agendas, change their views and hold contradictory views (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000, p. 3).

According to Hollway and Jefferson (2000, p. 2), it is important for researchers to realise they cannot assume people are 'telling it like it is' or that people know 'what makes them tick'. The research process entails selecting, modifying and interpreting what people say in interviews or in published documents so it is important to begin from a reflexive position of awareness of the power

researchers have to interpret another's experience. Given the ambiguity of people's accounts of their experience, the study can only deal with representations of this experience through an interpretive approach to analysing the *talk* that is the artefact of the interview process (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000).

Issues of memory

The approach taken to eliciting narratives in this study has advantages but also some disadvantages. At times the interview may have felt like a test of memory rather than an opportunity for the participants to identify issues of significance to them. Some of the social workers struggled to recall key events and their meanings from as far back as ten years. It could be argued that this does not necessarily mean the events were insignificant at the time but may point to the possibility that more recent and acutely challenging events had influenced or replaced memories from earlier years. In the context of the interview, participants would often return to the recent past or the present when constructing an account of changes that occurred at an earlier time. This may have been because at the time of the interviews (early to mid-2008) the participants were emerging out of period of implementation of increasingly punitive policy initiatives such as the imposition of eight-week non-payment penalties and related income management requirements.

Participants were clearly frustrated at times with their less than perfect memories so it became necessary to offer reassurance that this study was not about seeking a coherent and factual historical account of change, but rather an account that reflects issues of importance to individual social workers. Mark Peel (2003, p.11) expresses this point in the following statement:

> Asked to describe our experiences and our lives, we do not rewind some
> figurative tape to a point in the past and provide a blow-by-blow account of

what happened. We create personal histories that are also stories, because remembering always involves shaping events into tales that can be told to the person who has asked for them. Memory is not the past as it exactly was, but the past as it seems now.

Deploying the subjectivity of the interviewer

My position as a former Centrelink social worker had both advantages and disadvantages in relation to the interactions that took place within the interviews. The advantages included a relative ease in gaining access to sources of information about the organisation due to my continuing professional relationships with Centrelink social workers. It was also clear in conducting the interviews that my own work experience contributed to some shared understandings about the context of practice, which meant that the flow of conversation was not frequently interrupted while I sought explanations about operational matters. However, it was necessary throughout all stages of the study for me to remind myself of the importance of remaining reflexive in an awareness of my own influence on the interview process. It was also essential throughout the study for me to assess my pre-judgements and value commitments in order to avoid foreclosing conclusions based on my own practice experiences in Centrelink (Alvesson, 2003).

Approach to analysing empirical material

Stages of analysis

The study proceeded through a number of stages to analyse empirical material produced from the various sources outlined above. The first stage involved identifying and transcribing relevant organisational texts, including speeches and

publications by the CEO of Centrelink and senior public service managers. The second stage of analysis involved reading organisational texts and social work interview transcripts in their entirety to understand the narrative of each agent before moving on to the third stage, which involved identifying recurring themes, issues and concepts generated across transcripts. The fourth stage of analysis involved a focused reading to identify themes of specific interest to the focus of this study. Coding and analysis were completed manually, without the use of qualitative research software, using the 'outline' view feature in Microsoft *Word* to create and highlight thematic order.

The fourth stage of analysis involved a read through directed in terms of my specific research questions and dual theoretical interest in the regulation of professional identity and the regulation of professional performances as experienced by the organisation and by individual participants. To assist in analysing the latter element of interest to this study, I developed an empirical approach that operationalised key elements of a particular articulation of the concept of performativity in order to analyse narratives of individual and organisational constructions of identity within the changing Centrelink workplace. The study used this conceptual framework and empirical tool to analyse narratives from two sets of agents:

- Speeches and conference presentations by Australian Federal government officials and members of the Centrelink Executive and other senior managers that consist of narratives in the public arena about the 'coming into being' of Centrelink as an identity and as a brand[12];

- Centrelink social work participants in the transformation of the income support and employment services field through public service corporatisation

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[12] A term used explicitly by members of the Centrelink Executive.

and welfare reform processes. The study elicited narratives from these social workers about the meanings they made of this experience for themselves as individuals, as members of the social work profession and as public servants employed by Centrelink.

As discussed in Chapter Two, one aspect of specific interest in this study draws upon Stephen Ball's articulation of the concept of performativity because it appears to offer a useful framework for interpretative analysis of interactive, social and regulative processes of professional identity formation within a public service context. For the purpose of this study, Ball's definition was broken down into its constituent elements in order to analyse research text to explore material and symbolic regulatory processes within Centrelink and accounts of responses to these processes by social workers.

This approach to analysis is underpinned by an assumption that processes of regulation of professional identity and professional performances go beyond external and instrumental strategies to ensure productivity, efficiency, accountability and responsiveness to government agendas. To this end, the analysis explores social work responses to processes of regulation that seek to engage social work subjectivities, motivations and professional commitments, described by Alvesson and Sköldberg (2009, p.195) as the 'subjectivising force of disciplinary technologies'. This requires analytical attention to interview talk about strategies of active and/or pragmatic engagement with elements of performative practices as well as a focus on micro-processes of resistance.

Research questions guiding the empirical study:

To reiterate, the following research questions guided the design and analysis of the empirical study for this thesis:

- How did Centrelink define and promote its organisational identity and performative expectations to client departments, employees, service users and the general public?

- What operational strategies did Centrelink use to regulate the performance of its public service employees?

- What discourses gave meaning to changing expectations of social workers in Centrelink during the period under investigation?

- What criteria did Centrelink social workers perceive the organisation used to judge their worth and value at different times during the period 1997 to the close of 2007 and how did individual social workers assess their *own* worth and value during this time?

- How did social workers respond to and reshape dominant discourses and constructions of their identities within Centrelink during this period?

Chapter Review

Chapter Three sets out the approach taken in this study to exploring the impact of a complex dynamic of public service organisational change and welfare policy reform on the understandings, identities and practice responses of a cohort of social workers within the case study organisation, Centrelink. This chapter also lays out the research design for the study, including: a rationale for selecting Centrelink as a case study organisation for this thesis; the process and purpose for constructing a timeline of Centrelink's performative moments from primary documents as a resource for structuring the analysis of empirical material and for constructing a research interview schedule; the approach to recruiting and

interviewing research participants; the approach to analysing empirical material, and the ethical considerations and specific research questions that informed the design, conduct and documentation of research interviews.

The following chapter begins with a brief account of the creation and design of Centrelink as new organisational and policy terrain before moving on to chart the evolution of social work in the field of income support in Australia. Key agents in the empirical component of the study will then be introduced, including a brief profile of each of the social work participants interviewed for this study. The discussion then proceeds to explore empirical material gathered for the study, with a focus on the participants' reasons for joining the field of income support and a brief account, drawing on their own words, of their experience of working as a social worker in the traditional public service department, DSS.

CHAPTER FOUR: 'Black hats' and 'bleeding hearts' – social work in the field of income support

Introduction

This is the first of three chapters to draw on empirical material collected for this study. Of particular interest to this thesis are the processes that come into play when a reforming government seeks to engage the commitment of its public service workforce to implement contested social policy reforms. This will involve attending to the operation of regulatory processes that include constructing and transmitting performance expectations, monitoring and evaluating work performance, and implementing material and symbolic rewards and sanctions. It is proposed that the nature of these processes changed over time with the move from a traditional public service department to an enterprising corporatised public service agency, and then back again. As mentioned in Chapter Two, the specific focus of this study is the impact of these regulatory processes on the ways in which social workers *become* or are *produced* in their daily engagement with organisational and welfare policy reforms.

This chapter begins by introducing the case study organisation *Centrelink* before moving on to outline the evolution of social work within the field of income support in Australia. Participants involved in the empirical study for this thesis will then be introduced, drawing on their own accounts of how they came to enter this field of social work practice. This section also draws upon the voices of the participants about some of their experiences in the precursor agency, The Department of Social Security (DSS). This discussion is included in order to establish a starting point for a narrative of change that will be explored in more detail in the following chapters. The participants include the ten Centrelink social workers interviewed for this study as well as Peter Humphries, the Deputy

Centrelink Social Work National Manager at the time the interviews were conducted. Peter's role in this research was outlined in the previous chapter.

A further player in the field who was not interviewed but who is crucially important to this study is Sue Vardon, the inaugural Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of Centrelink during the period July 1997 to December 2004. It was not possible to interview Sue Vardon because she had moved on from Centrelink before this study commenced. However, Sue Vardon published a number of performative texts that are important to the focus of this study. Her role as a 'transformational leader' (Halligan and Wills, 2008, p. 165) was significant in the narrative of change outlined below. As such, a brief profile of Sue Vardon, a self-proclaimed 'committed' social worker herself, will be included along with the profiles of the research participants below.

Introducing Centrelink as new organisational and policy terrain

The focus agency *Centrelink* was officially launched in September 1997 by the then Prime Minister John Howard as a new form of corporatised public service agency designed to integrate and deliver the government's evolving public management and welfare policy reform agendas. In launching the new organisation, the Prime Minister stated:

> Centrelink's creation is probably the biggest single reform undertaken in the area of public service delivery in the past fifty years. The size and dimension of this change cannot be underestimated. It represents something that previous generations of administrators at a Commonwealth level have dreamt of doing but haven't been able to do (Howard, 1997, p. 1).

The government established Centrelink to take over responsibility for the administration of income support payments and unemployment risk profiling and referral functions following the abolition of DSS and the Commonwealth Employment Service (CES). Centrelink evolved as a federal government statutory agency providing what has been described as a one-stop-shop - or 'first-stop-shop' (Halligan and Wills, 2008, p.3) - for the delivery of a range of government services.

This approach to service delivery replaced a traditional model of government that was built on direct state provision of services by government departments. The traditional public service department was characterised by a public administration paradigm based on bureaucracy, hierarchy and process, under the direction of multipurpose ministerial departments (Halligan and Wills, 2008, p.2). Work previously carried out directly by the DSS and the CES through a traditional hierarchy was now carried out by the specialised service delivery agency Centrelink, along with contracted not-for-profit and for-profit employment services. These programs were redesigned so that they were no longer controlled through traditional hierarchical arrangements but through the terms of an agreement or contract with the Australian Government (Rowlands, 1999).

Centrelink was designed to enact the government's commitment to NPM principles, outlined in detail in Chapter One of this thesis, such as: purchase of service relationships; an orientation towards specified results and performance, measured through new performance management technologies; a customer-driven focus; the cultivation of a business style, and the separation of policy and implementation functions (Halligan and Wills, 2008). Centrelink received funding from various government departments to deliver a broad range of services in what was heralded as a *contestable* service delivery environment. Centrelink as a corporatised statutory agency suddenly faced the prospect of competing with community based non-profit services and profit-making organisations for the

business of the government. This regime of contestability was a component of an integrated strategy, along with performance measurement technologies, that sought to discipline the organisation and its public servant workforce to be responsive to government agendas and to achieve the outcomes prescribed within the various funding contracts it signed up to (Halligan and Wills, 2008).

The intention behind the creation of Centrelink was to replace old forms of public service management with a more entrepreneurial ethos of service provision (Halligan, 2003). This institutional reform process provided a scaffold for a welfare reform agenda that was premised on changing constructions of social citizenship in Australia, as discussed in Chapter One. Centrelink as an organisation no longer had an explicit role to play in the development of income support and employment services policy. Instead, it had a mandate to focus on specified tasks of program management and service delivery in accordance with detailed service level agreements negotiated with various government departments (Mulgan, 2002, p. 46).

Sheila Ross - Centrelink's Chief Customer Officer in 2002 - explained the link between service delivery and policy outcomes:

> We recognise that the service component of our business has the potential to impact on the extent to which policy outcomes are achieved. If we can isolate what it is about the way we deliver services that impacts on our customers' behaviour - for example, the extent to which they feel compelled to notify us of changed circumstances, or the willingness with which they respond to participation requirements - we can make their experience one that is more suited to supporting the achievement of policy outcomes (Ross, 2002, p. 22).

Halligan and Wills (2008, pp. 36-47) suggest that there were a number of distinct phases in the evolution of Centrelink during the period under investigation for this study (1997 to 2007). These were:

- (1997-2000): A period of creation and establishment, with a focus on effective governance structures; bringing disparate staff into one organisational culture; the creation of a branding strategy to establish the organisation as distinct from its traditional public service predecessor; conducting national and local surveys of customer [13] views about what they expected from the new organisation; development of a performance measurement process; the re-design of offices; a focus on productivity improvements, leading to retrenchment of staff; identification of 'best practice' approaches and identification of the most productive offices throughout the national network; seeking efficiency measures; development of new information and communication technology, and a significant change to service delivery in the form of 'point of contact' decision making by staff.

- (2001-2002) A further re-development of service delivery approaches to rationalise payment streams along the lines of 'life-events' rather than specific payment lines; the implementation of the Government's *Australians Working Together* policy platform, including the administration of 'preparing for work agreements'; renewed emphasis on community partnerships, and training programs for all frontline staff to enhance their understanding of issues impacting on the lives of 'customers' and community service options.

- (2003-2004) A move beyond the formative period to a focus on improving alignment with strategic themes and simplifying planning, targets and key

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[13] The term 'customer' took over from the previously used label 'client' in 1997 as a result of the corporatisation of Centrelink.

performance indicators to enhance performance monitoring and to improve operational planning.

- (2005-2008) A period conceptualised by Halligan and Wills as moving 'back to the future' as the federal government introduced new governance arrangements for the public service resulting in Centrelink moving back into a more traditional public service model with the re-establishment of centralised control. This period also saw the election in November 2007 of a new Labor Government with a renewed agenda for welfare reform.

These periods fit with the significant moments identified by the participants in this study in their accounts of changing opportunities and challenges for social work practice, as discussed in the following two chapters.

The evolution of social work in the field of income support

According to John Lawrence (1965), most university-trained social workers in Australia were employed in non-government agencies before 1940 with a strong concentration in medical settings. World War Two created new demands on Australia's economic, political and social capacity (Lawrence, 1965, p. 85) and the 1940s saw the Commonwealth Government take full financial control over the income tax system. This period also saw a significant extension of government social services.

In 1941, the Menzies Government established a Commonwealth Joint Parliamentary Committee on Social Security to look into '…ways and means of improving social and living conditions in Australia and [to] rectify anomalies in existing legislation' (Kewley, 1973, p. 176). One of the recommendations of the

Committee was that the newly established Department of Social Services conduct research into social problems and the impact of social legislation. The Committee also recommended that social workers be recruited to see whether they would be a useful addition to the staff of this newly established public service department (Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves, 2001, p.122). In 1944 a social worker named Lyra Taylor was invited by the Director-General of Social Services to become the Chief Researcher and Administrative Officer of the newly created Social Work and Research Branch of the Department. According to Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves (2001, p. 122), Lyra Taylor's job description included the establishment of a national social work service, a social research and policy division and a library.

T.H. Kewley (1973, p. 466) noted that the employment of social workers by the Department of Social Services reflected a growing awareness that income support payments alone, while alleviating acute financial hardship, did not address the underlying causes of poverty. According to Kewley, it was thought that the use of trained social workers, still a relatively new profession in Australia in the 1940s, would enable beneficiaries to obtain skilled help in addressing the problems that contributed to, or arose from, their unemployment, sickness, invalidity, widowhood, age or other situations.

In 1947, Lyra Taylor reported to the first conference of the Australian Association of Social Workers that the broad mission of social workers in the Department of Social Services was: the provision of a skilled casework service for the Department's beneficiaries; to make the administration as humane as possible, and to gather and develop a useful instrument for social progress by assembling evidence on social questions (Fitzgibbons and Hargreaves, 2001, p.122). This project took many forms over the next fifty years but essentially, social workers were employed to provide a broad and generic casework service to people who were forced to make their living from income support payments.

In 1996, just prior to the corporatisation of the DSS and the creation of the Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency (CSDA)[14], the major workload areas of the social work service were described in the internal *Social Work Handbook* (DSS, 1996) as:

- Provision of social casework services, with a focus on clients who were especially vulnerable to serious harm, hardship or marginalisation because of major changes in their personal and social circumstances;

- Income maintenance assessment services where the Social Security Act provided for the exercise of discretion in relation to a client's social circumstances;

- Client related management functions [active participation in the office management team and related functions];

- Client related community development functions, contributing to local service establishment, coordination, evaluation and enhancement;

- Provision of input into income support policy development through a formal departmental Budget development and evaluation process and, social work student education, as required by the professional association.

The transition to the new organisation Centrelink did not significantly change the structure of the Social Work Service at the time, with a smooth transfer of positions from one organisational form to another. However, this organisational transformation created new opportunities and challenges for the Social Work

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[14] The provisional title for the new statutory public service agency - later changed to *Centrelink*.

Service. Centrelink continued to employ around 600 social workers, mostly in frontline positions in customer service centres across Australia (Centrelink, 1998, p. 153). In addition, a number of social workers were appointed to high-level service delivery portfolio management and project positions in various program areas within Centrelink.

Peta Fitzgibbon (2000, p. 184), Manager of Social Work Services in Centrelink at the time of the transition, explained that social workers were required in the early days of organisational transformation to engage in what was termed 'enterprise practice and review' processes to 'identify opportunities to enhance and promote their entrepreneurial credentials while demonstrating their continuing viability and value to the core business of Centrelink'. Peta Fitzgibbon explained this process in the following way, with reference to new skills required of social workers within a context of contestability:

> Social workers need to become more sophisticated at marketing their skills and the services they offer and the outcomes they assist in achieving. Ultimately this will determine whether anyone is prepared to pay for these services because they need to see the value that is added to the process (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 187).

The Social Work Service developed what was called a 'repositioning paper' in 1998 that saw the traditional social work role in policy evaluation and development diminished due to the separation of the service delivery agency from the government policy department. Over time, a stronger emphasis was placed on the development of what was called 'customer service partnerships', tied closely to the Government's 'participation agenda', focused on strengthening service user attachment to the labour market. This led to placing a stronger emphasis on the active involvement of social workers in the various manifestations of the Australian Government 'Welfare-to-Work' policy agenda that was outlined in

Chapter One of this thesis. Over the ten-year period under investigation, the social work role in Centrelink evolved in its transition from a broad social welfare and social policy focus to a more closely defined role in specified labour market and policy compliance activities (McDonald and Marston, 2006).

In the year 2000, Peta Fitzgibbon, identified the challenges confronting Centrelink social workers arising from the fast pace of change in the emerging organisation in her statement:

> Social work in Centrelink is largely having to find its own way, in that change is occurring so fast that practitioners are required to be in there 'doing it' without recourse to reflection and academic input...We do not have the luxury to reflect...[We] have to make some informed decisions about what is possible within the boundaries of what constitutes the core principles, purposes and values of social work' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p.176).

The latter part of this statement encapsulates a key theme running through the remainder of this thesis: the balance that needed to be struck between the imperative to maintain a viable position for the social work service within Centrelink, while at the same time reflecting 'on the run' about codified professional values in the face of rapidly evolving organisational and social policy challenges.

Introducing the research participants

This section introduces the various participants in this research study through their own accounts of their pathway into the field of income support in the Australian Public Service. However, before introducing the frontline Centrelink social work participants, there will be a brief introduction to Sue Vardon, the Chief Executive

Officer (CEO) of Centrelink during the period 1997 to the close of 2004, again drawing on her own words to provide a flavour of her 'transformational' approach to leadership.

Sue Vardon talked about the creation of Centrelink in the following terms in an address to the National Press Club on 2 February 2000 (Vardon, 2000, p. 3):

> The story I'm about to tell is one of significant and monumental challenge. It ranks up there with the big ones – not quite like landing a man on the moon, but close. This Government said it was going to create a one-stop-shop for Government services. One-stop-shop? Land a man on the moon? You've got to be kidding! Well we did it. We have an amazing story with Centrelink.

This quote is included as a contrast to the statement highlighted earlier in this chapter by Prime Minister John Howard about the creation of Centrelink. Sue Vardon's statement covers similar territory but she presents the narrative of change in more colourful terms, demonstrating humour and embellishment for dramatic and performative effect – a feature that came to characterise her style of leadership throughout her reign as CEO of Centrelink. Sue Vardon's entrepreneurial management style can be compared with the more circumspect approach taken by government ministers and senior government administrators who are tutored to be discreet, cautious and concerned with avoidance of reputational damage.

Arlene Harvey (2001, p. 253) offers another perspective on the type of management style exemplified in Sue Vardon's narrative above, in her account of the 'charismatic leader'. Harvey defines charismatic leaders as having exemplary rhetorical skills and powers of persuasion, as well as a sense of drama. She cites Shamir, House and Arthur (1994) in their assessment that these skills are often a

feature of impression management strategies that seek to align leaders with their followers through appeals to shared history, values and community (Harvey, 2001, p. 253). As will be seen in Chapter Five, some of the social work participants in this study talked about the impression management strategies adopted by the CEO and other members of the Centrelink Executive to engage the enthusiasm of public servants to achieve required organisational objectives.

The social work participants

Broad characteristics

Centrelink social workers from New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory were interviewed for this study. There is no attempt in this thesis to evaluate the specific impact of age, gender, culture, location or substantive rank in the social work hierarchy on the social workers' accounts of change so the study did not seek to balance these characteristics in the selection of participants. In the end, two men (not counting Peter Humphries) and eight women were interviewed. Participants came from a broad range of cultural backgrounds and workplace locations, including inner-metropolitan, suburban, outer-metropolitan and regional and rural settings.

All of the participants were working in designated social work positions at the time of the interview. All participants had substantial experience in frontline social work practice and all of them had also spent various amounts of time in social work management and/or customer service centre management or project management positions during their career in DSS/Centrelink. All of the frontline social work participants had been employed in Centrelink for periods ranging

from around 12 years to more than 20 years[15] at the time of the interviews and they had all been active participants in the transition from DSS to Centrelink.

As a reminder to the reader, each of the frontline social workers chose a pseudonym so they could feel comfortable speaking openly throughout the interview. Some of the participants chose names that sought to conceal their gender and/or cultural background. Every effort was taken to remove interview text that might identify individual participants, including sending a copy of the transcript to each participant to check whether there was anything in the document that they would wish me to delete before writing up the analysis.

The path to social work in DSS/Centrelink

The first question asked of all of the social work participants was how they came to be a social worker in the DSS – the precursor agency to Centrelink. This question was asked up-front because it mirrors a value-laden question that is often asked of social workers who work in Centrelink, particularly those who have remained in the organisation for as long as the participants in this study. According to Cathie Peut (2000, p. 49), social workers in Centrelink come in for a disproportionate amount of criticism, even from social workers in other fields, for their supposed implication in the oppressive dimensions of worker power[16]. She argues that Centrelink social work is often portrayed as the 'black hat, social control side of the care/control opposition' in social work discourse and that social workers within statutory agencies, especially those associated with the

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[15] Details of the exact amount of time in employment in DSS/Centrelink have not been included in order to protect the identity of individual participants.

[16] For example, see a Letter to the Editor by Nilva Egana (AASW member), on the topic of Centrelink social work involvement in the Northern Territory Emergency Response. *AASW National Bulletin*, Vol. 18 Issue 1, Autumn 2009

public social services, 'must often contend with a referring social worker's overt perception…within such a dualistic framework' (Peut, 2000, p. 50).

The following quotes include brief introductory snippets of information about each participant before their own words are used to explain their reason for taking-up a position in the DSS/Centrelink. This brief account might provide a provisional understanding of the individual participant's social work value stance, at least as it animated their narrative at the time of the interview. For explanatory purposes, the social work hierarchy in Centrelink consisted of four substantive levels at the time of the interviews:

- The *National Director of Social Work* (at Senior Executive Service level), located in the National Office in Canberra with a small staff, consisting at the time of a Deputy Director and a small team of social work project management staff;

- *Business Managers Social Work* (located within an Area Management administrative structure): responsible for the management of a number of service quality portfolios as well as managing a cluster of social work teams in a particular region, including the professional supervision of around 10-15 senior social workers;

- *Centrelink Professional Level 2* ('CP2'): a senior social work position most often based in a 'customer service centre[17] (CSC)' and generally a member of the office management team, with a specific responsibility for providing professional supervision to a small team of social workers. CP2 level social workers also engage in direct social work practice, depending on the size of the team and the nature of the CSC;

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[17] The name in 2008 of point of contact service centres – replacing the name 'regional office' used in the days of DSS.

- *Centrelink Profession Level 1* ('CP1'): from graduate entry level positions to social workers with extensive frontline experience who are primarily responsible for performing direct social work practice and often broader project activities across one or more CSCs.

Who's Who – the frontline social work participants

Audrey: Commenced as a social worker in a graduate entry-level position more than ten years before the date of the interview. Audrey came to study social work as a mature aged student with experience as a public servant in a different 'human service' focused government department. At the time of the interview, Audrey was working as a CP2 in an outer-metropolitan CSC in a geographic region characterised by high levels of long-term unemployment, high rates of reported child abuse and domestic violence, high density social housing and a significant proportion of residents from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, including refugees. Audrey was supervising a team of around six social workers across a number of CSCs:

> In thinking about doing social work, and as I was doing the degree and thinking about placements and where I'd like to do it - doing it as a public servant was always really appealing to me…There was that real kind of dichotomy between social care and social control that was developed in the social work literature and in the way social workers talked about themselves and other social workers, so that working in the government sector was seen as lots of control. And *they*[18] were the bad social workers who didn't really care about people, and *they* were imposing policies and legislation on people, and so on. I was quite passionately concerned about that sort of

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[18] Emphasis is documented throughout the direct quotes by the use of italics in the text. This convention seeks to demonstrate the emphasis used by the participants themselves as heard in the digital recordings of the interviews.

dichotomy. I really disagreed with it…I felt comfortable in large bureaucratic organisations. In some ways I thought that's a place where you *could* do things because you could be lost in the mass - and in some ways, in smaller organisations, people stand out.

Claudia: Commenced working in DSS more than 15 years before the date of the interview, as a mature aged new graduate. Claudia worked in a number of specialist and mainstream office teams as a social worker and had cycled between the CP1 and CP2 role a number of times over the years. Claudia was working as a CP1 in an inner-metropolitan office at the time of the interview in a community with a mixed demographic of older residents from diverse cultural backgrounds and a more recent influx of increasingly affluent people drawn to an area of high real estate value. Claudia talked about surprising people with her decision to apply for a position in DSS:

> Ending up doing casework in DSS - that was a surprise to a lot of people, including all my friends at university who thought, 'for *sure* she'll go into policy or something'.

David: Joined DSS as a social worker more than 15 years before the date of the interview. David commenced work in DSS soon after arriving in Australia as a new migrant with social work experience in another country. David was working as a CP2 at the time of the interview in an office located in a suburb with significant levels of linguistic and cultural diversity, including communities of long-term and recently arrived migrants and refugees. David was supervising a team of CP1 social workers across three sites at the time of the interview:

> I had some contact with DSS because I applied for benefits soon after coming to Australia so I knew it as an organisation. Someone told me they had social workers there so I thought, oh, that's great – *that's something* I

can relate to. It's about helping people who are new to the country - things like that. So that kind of made me steer in that direction

Gloria: Joined DSS as a mature aged new graduate social worker more than 20 years before the interview. Gloria had worked for some years as a youth worker before going back to university to obtain a social work qualification. At the time of the interview, Gloria was working as a CP2, supervising a number of social workers across more than one site in an outer-suburban location. Gloria had also worked in a range of non-social work management and portfolio management roles within DSS/Centrelink:

> My second [student] placement was in community health, and as part of my placement orientation I went around to visit the social worker at DSS. She gave it *such* a rap, she *really* did. She told me so much about it. She was really quite inspiring. I thought, *that* sounds interesting. You could see there was potential to do *all* sorts of things.

Mary: Applied for a graduate entry-level social work position after completing her degree and had been a social worker in DSS/Centrelink for more than 20 years at the time of the interview. Mary had worked in frontline positions, project roles and in senior social work and broader office management roles, as well as the Business Manager Social Work at different times throughout this period. Mary initially took up a three-month locum position in a suburb close to home because it was convenient:

> I really didn't think that DSS was where I wanted to have a career as a social worker. That was because - it was having a bit of an idealistic notion of what social work was about, of being *out there* and changing the world. I was really interested in policy...I just didn't think working in DSS gave me enough opportunity to have the sort of influence that I thought I needed to

have as a social worker. At the time, the social work courses had a strong focus on social change, so that was where I wanted to be. There was always that tension between helping the individual or working with a community and changing things in a broader way. Some people were very drawn to working with individuals but I was more drawn to the other. And that's why I didn't think that DSS was the organisation for me. Having said that, I'm *still* here more than 20 years later [laughs].

Peta[19]: Joined DSS as an entry-level new graduate in a locum position soon after completing a social work degree. Peta had undertaken a student placement at DSS in the final year of the degree. Peta had been a social worker at both CP1 and CP2 levels for more than 20 years and was working as a CP1 at the time of the interview in a large and busy outer-suburban office in an area characterised by a high proportion of long-term unemployed residents with Anglo-Celtic heritage. Peta talked about bringing a strong interest in political economy and poverty studies to social work – areas of particular relevance to work in DSS/Centrelink:

When I was going through university, I didn't like social work subjects – *that's* for sure! I liked subjects that had a political bent to them. I liked sociology - anything that took me out of the social work school [laughs] - political economy of development and subjects like that. I liked poverty studies. I wasn't intending to start looking for work at the time I was invited to work as a locum social worker at DSS but the opportunity availed and I went for it [laughs]. And because I'd had that experience previously as a student on placement, I thought, I'm probably in a better position than some to do the work. It was just, this opportunity presented and I thought, 'you can't look a gift-horse in the mouth' [laughs].

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[19] Note to reader: 'Peta' is not Peta Fitzgibbon, the former National Manager Social Work. This was a pseudonym chosen by one of the frontline social worker participants.

Plato: Had been working as a social worker in CP1, CP2 and social work project roles for around 15 years at the time of the interview, as well as acting in the role of Social Work Business Manager at different times throughout this period. At the time of the interview, Plato was working as a CP2 in a geographic region with high levels of long-term unemployment and cultural diversity, including a significant proportion of residents who were recent migrants or refugees. Plato undertook a social work student placement in the final year of the degree:

> I initially thought, before I commenced my social work placement, that this wouldn't be for me. Then I found that - perhaps I'd had a bit of a dose of *idealism* and then a bit of a dose of *reality*, and then I thought, well, this doesn't seem the place I *thought* it might be – that *stifling* a place. When the opportunity came up, I'd just finished university so it happily coincided and I thought, 'I'll give DSS a go'.

Ruth: Began working in DSS around 15 years before the interview. Ruth arrived in Australia with social work qualifications gained in another country. Ruth had worked in CP1 and CP2 positions across a number of sites. At the time of the interview, Ruth was working in a region with a significant amount of new housing development on the suburban fringes:

> In [the country I came from] I used to work for the government in 'Social Services', which is different from here. So I thought OK, I'll approach Social Services. The next best thing was the DSS. I went along to [a particular DSS office]. I talked to the social workers and I thought, 'yeah – I could do it here for three months'. So I went there to do a placement and never left.

Skye: Had worked for DSS for just under 20 years at the time of the interview. Skye obtained a senior social work position in DSS in a regional location that

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services a dispersed rural area and was still there at the time of the interview. Skye had also worked away from this location for a period of time in a non-social work portfolio management role.

> On my life plan - this isn't going to sound very professional at all [laughs] - I had been working in [another agency] for five years and I was returning from overseas leave and when I came back, I had a particular plan and DSS was going to give me a nine to five job and a reasonable income without too much other drama around it. That was a *nice fantasy* wasn't it? [laughs].

Steve: Had been working as a social worker in various capacities for more than 20 years at the time of the interview. Steve was working as a CP2 in a large CSC that provided services to people in an area of significant linguistic and cultural diversity. Steve had worked at different times as a CP1, CP2 and in portfolio and office management roles:

> [I came to be a social worker in DSS] by accident probably – more accident than design! I'd done some community work in a neighbourhood centre. The contract had finished on that and I felt that I needed to do something different, in a more secure position. I had a friend who was working as a social worker in DSS who suggested I just join the Federal Public Service and put my first preference down as the DSS …'and before you know it, you'll be working as a social worker'. And I thought, *that* sounds OK – *that* sounds reasonable.

'Reconciling my values': Participants' memories of the DSS days

At the outset of this study, I asked all of the frontline social work participants to talk about their strongest memories of their earlier experience of employment in DSS. This question was posed to establish a starting point in a narrative of

change. Without prompting, every participant talked about the challenges they experienced in their social work assessment role in DSS. By way of background, social workers did not have delegated power to make decisions about entitlement to income support payments and related services until legislative changes were brought about in April 1998.[20] Until this time, social workers could only conduct assessments and make written recommendations to inform a final decision by senior administrative team leaders who had specified delegated authority under the Social Security Act.

David expressed the anxieties and frustrations of many of the study participants during the DSS days in the following response:

> I think my strongest memory of that time was the assessments that we undertook for the 'unreasonable to live at home' rate [of Youth Allowance]. I think it was called Young Homeless Allowance at that time. We weren't the delegates at that stage so I remember having to do these massive reports by hand…Then after you did all of that, you had to go to the team leader for an approval and the team leader could look at it and say, 'Are you *joking?* You know, he's not homeless – he's got a *roof* over his head'. And then you'd have to say, '*no*, that's not true'. One particular team leader gave me *such* a hard time. I was really petrified of him. He somehow liked me so that was in my favour. He probably saw how *helpless* I felt [laughs].

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[20] In April 1998 social workers were granted for the first time limited delegated authority to make decisions about entitlement to specified income support payments for young people who could not be expected to live in the parental home due to verified serious abuse, neglect or similar issues. Social workers were also delegated at this time to make decisions about whether it was safe and reasonable to expect parenting payment recipients to seek child support payments from non-custodial parents.

Audrey talked about similar experiences and what she learned from such challenges:

> [The assessment report] was going to somebody who wasn't a social worker and you had to *really* advocate for your decision - the *detail* - the *examples* (laughs). *Huge* amounts of detail in the reports! I remember that process being rather fraught. Just *really* being aware of the audience for that report**.**

In addition to this fraught process, Mary talked about being confronted in her days in DSS by what she perceived as the value differences between social workers and many of their administrative colleagues:

> The hardest thing for me was reconciling my values with the values in the office - with other staff. Back then it was a *horrible* environment where we used to call our clients 'bennos'. It was a very judgemental environment… I was young and naïve and thinking that everyone had these values of fairness and social justice, whether you were a social worker or not.

Steve recalled a culture of punitive attitudes and poor communication skills amongst some administrative and management colleagues in the days of DSS:

> I can remember right back to my early days - one of the *really* distinctive memories I have. I was out in the waiting room for some reason. We had a person on reception who was smoking, going '*next*'! [adopts a disinterested tone], 'next'!, 'next!' [laughs]. And that's sort of like the typical thing that used to happen. If you saw that today, people would go - '*whaaat*? I don't believe that'. You'd be *horrified*!

Mary and Steve are referring here to an issue that challenged many social workers in their mandated role as office advocates for respectful service encounters with service users. Recruitment to administrative roles in DSS involved sitting for the Federal Public Service Exam, which assessed an applicant's administrative aptitude. While there were many caring and committed administrative staff at all levels of the public service, there were also many staff members who were out of their depth and insufficiently prepared and trained for work in a public service context with a high degree of contact with service users in vulnerable situations and with complex needs.

Gloria reflected on social work in DSS as being 'on the outer' within this context due to their professional status and their stance as advocates:

> I think social workers were really on the outer…*very much* on the outer…a minority. And in some ways, maybe we contributed to that too. We were probably a bit more *precious* back in those days. You might say that maybe we were a bit like, on the *high* ground more - maybe its part of that professional thing. I'm sure we thought that we were there as advocates for the clients and these other people seemed really to be *against* the clients…They had this real attitude of like, 'this is my money' - *justify* why I should pay these people[21]! It's incredible when you start thinking about it – how judgemental the culture made people.

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[21] An attitude that was clearly apparent to service users in both DSS and Centrelink days, as articulated in accounts provided to the authors of the book '*Half a Citizen: Life on welfare in Australia',* published in 2011 and referred to later in this chapter.

Social workers as 'bleeding hearts'

When the participants were asked about the criteria they thought administrative colleagues used to assess the value of social workers in DSS days, the label 'bleeding heart' came up in almost every case.

In Ruth's words:

> I think social work was seen as an '*out there'* type of thing. I don't think we felt included in the DSS. I felt we *weren't* included – we were just an add-on and when things got difficult, 'we'll give [the client] to the social worker'. I don't think we were seen as giving value. I think a lot of people saw us as a pain in the backside – you know, a bit like this *bleeding heart* type thing. But the quality of our work – I don't think anyone understood what we were doing.

Bringing together the themes of values, strategies and judgements made about social workers, Audrey commented:

> I was careful about what I said to some of those [administrative staff]. I didn't want to be seen as a 'bleeding heart' but again, I didn't want to compromise my values by saying things I didn't agree with. I found that initial process of just trying to get the lay of the land - how people thought, what their attitudes were, how punitive they were, how much they were prepared to use their discretion to benefit someone and see the legislation in a beneficial way - and so I really started to get this idea, this is what we're doing, we're really trying to *persuade*. But also, it meant I think that if you established some credibility with someone, you laid the groundwork so that in the future, you can already approach it with that view, you don't have to prove your case over and over again.

To summarise, the participants recalled working in an organisational environment where social workers were often on the 'outer' in terms of their organisational mandate and their professional values and mission. Participants talked about having to work hard to establish relationships of credibility with non-social work colleagues who were employed for their administrative skills rather than their public contact interest or skills. The social workers also took seriously their identity as advocates, a role promoted in social work education courses and in the Australian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics.

Harking back to Lyra Taylor's statement in the early days of the Department of Social Services, social workers were given a broad mission to make the administration of income support as humane as possible, bringing them into tension at times with discourses, policies and practices that impeded dignified service provision - a challenge that will be explored further in the following chapters. As research with people who depend on publicly provided services in Australia demonstrates, a service user's self-respect and dignity is often surrendered in return for basic levels of income support and related services (Peel, 2003; Murphy, Murray, Chalmers, Martin and Marston, 2011).

Sustaining factors in social work practice in DSS

Each of the frontline participants was asked about the factors that sustained them and kept them working in DSS in the face of the challenges identified above. Their responses fell into three categories: the nature of the direct work with service users; their team relationships and, the flexibility and autonomy they enjoyed compared to their later days in Centrelink.

Direct work with service users: Audrey talked about feeling 'embraced' by some clients in 'really good longer-term relationships'. Claudia felt that she was 'really able to make a difference to clients'. For Peta, it was about 'learning about the issues people presented with'.

Team relationships: Gloria talked about the value for her of being part of a large team of social workers: 'You've got your values and you *know* why you're there'. Audrey appreciated being able to talk through dilemmas with social work colleagues in the office she worked in: …'it was an OK place to be questioning, and to know that those questions were being shared by other social workers in the team'. Plato enjoyed working in a team of both social workers and non-social work staff: 'I felt that was a big motivator just to come to work really'.

The relative flexibility of the social work role: Steve felt: 'It was almost like you had a lot of freedom to do things'. According to David, each office had its own approach – 'we were quite independent and we could say, alright, today we will cross off some time in the diary' [something unheard of in later days].

Additional sustaining factors: Mary talked about being sustained by 'a passion for social work and for social justice'. Peta mentioned her love for policy: 'I'd read *right* through the *Guide to the DSS Act*, which nobody else would have even *bothered* with'. Claudia talked about being sustained by her 'awareness of the big picture: changes happen within a context and you can't isolate that from what is happening'.

The context for the delivery of income support and employment services and for social work practice changed significantly with the launch of the corporatised public service delivery agency Centrelink, as will be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

CHAPTER FIVE: 'We don't have to only *work for* Centrelink – we have to *love* it'! The Vardon era

Introduction

The previous chapter provided a condensed account of some of the pleasures and challenges identified by the frontline social work participants of their work in the former DSS. Chapter Five brings together empirical material from organisational texts and from transcripts of interviews with Centrelink social workers to present findings about the way social workers understood and responded to processes of organisational and policy change during a period of significant reform. The processes of particular interest to this study relate to the ways social workers *become* or are *produced* as organisational subjects within the context of regulated organisational life. It was proposed in Chapter Two that these processes have something to do with the regulation of identity in the workplace, as well as with the regulation of workplace performances.

To this end, Chapter Five analyses empirical material that is focused on efforts to engage Centrelink social workers' responsiveness – and arguably, enthusiasm - towards achieving organisational goals within a practice and policy context transformed by NPM principles. Chapter Six will then move on to explore social work responses to a performative regime focused on ensuring coherence between individual and organisational performance within a context of public service contestability. These two organisational regulatory processes are closely related, as will be discussed in further detail in a concluding chapter that will bring the analysis together in order to theorise social work engagement with the reforming state in Australia.

A detailed focus on Centrelink affords a unique opportunity to explore the operation of NPM inspired organisational reform processes in Australia. All agencies across the Australian public sector have been transformed to varying degrees by NPM reforms but the rationale for specific agency changes are generally not explained in detail and promoted in the public domain. The Australian public service agency Centrelink is an exception because it was explicit in its appropriation of private sector management and marketing strategies. Over time, a corpus of organisational texts was developed and distributed to staff and promoted in written form and verbal presentations to outside observers. These organisational texts contain a great deal of detail that makes visible the change processes employed by Centrelink to engage a range of stakeholders in its development, operation and evaluation. Centrelink was launched with a flourish in the early term of a government with high expectations that the agency would act as a torchbearer across the public sector for improved productivity and performance. Centrelink was governed by a Board of Management, with a significant proportion of the Executive bringing high-level private sector management credentials to their roles. Halligan and Wills (2008, p. 108) describe the unique public service qualities of Centrelink as,

> combin[ing] some formal autonomy through corporate governance arrangements (an independently appointed CEO and board) and operations (involving relationships with several departments), with informal features that facilitate conformity with government policy and preferences in politically sensitive fields.

The inaugural CEO of Centrelink, Sue Vardon represented the rationale behind the creation of Centrelink in the following terms (Vardon, 1998, p.1):

> The over-riding objective of this reform is to improve the competitiveness and responsiveness of the public sector to the needs of government and the Australian community. The reforms are aimed at building a performance

culture within the public sector and putting it on more of a business-like footing; fostering a competitive environment, shifting the focus from complying with rules to managing for results and to plan, budget and report on outcomes and outputs…increased use of management improvement tools such as competitive tendering and contracting, the discipline imposed by purchaser/provider relationships and benchmarking. We are passionate about making this organisation a success.

Sue Vardon's statement above summarises many of the key elements of Australian public service reform outlined in the first chapter of this thesis, with an explicit statement about the value of private sector management strategies for guiding the achievement of required outcomes. In a later presentation, Sue Vardon (2000, p.1) went on to identify some of the challenges and opportunities confronting the new organisation:

We at Centrelink know about challenges. Since our creation in July 1997 we have been meeting our challenges by coming up with innovative ways to deliver exceptional service while giving value for money in an environment of close scrutiny, not only from the government but also from the media. And what does this mean in terms of our customers? Every year we have over 300 million opportunities to delight or offend. These are the times when our customers interact with us. Each of these opportunities has a multitude of facets – each facet representing a moment of truth in which our customers form an impression about Centrelink… Every contact we have with our customers is an opportunity to be the sort of service provider we want to be and to meet customer expectations, or is a lost opportunity. Every lost opportunity when we don't get it right means jeopardising our brand.

The tone of this statement is consistent with many of Sue Vardon's public pronouncements about the identity of Centrelink as an innovative new organisation that was distinct from its traditional public service department predecessor. The audience for Sue Vardon's presentations was varied but it could

be argued that such statements represent a form of 'impression management', described by Harvey (2001, p. 256) as a 'projection of desired identity images to persuade an audience'. The performative intent behind such efforts to persuade arises from the competitive environment that Centrelink was thrust into when it was given a mandate to remake itself rapidly into an entrepreneurial public service agency in (potential) competition with a broad range of service providers.

In addition, a consistent feature of Sue Vardon's oral presentations is the use of terms of inclusion, in particular the repeated use of the pronoun 'we', and the possessive adjective 'our' - a strategy that attempts to personalise and bring the organisation to life, as well as seeking to project an image of a collective endeavour amongst Centrelink public servants to engage with and win the regard of service users whose feedback would go on to become a measure of organisational performance and value. It could also be argued that this approach seeks to engage the interest of a range of stakeholders in the fledgling identity of Centrelink as an organic entity that *means* something to them, thereby encouraging their loyalty within a competitive market.

According to Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 621), managers may promote, more or less self consciously, a particular form of organisational experience for 'consumption by employees'. In this specific instance, the strategy appears to seek to persuade a broader audience – those listening to the presentation in the auditorium and later, Centrelink employees and representatives of client departments - that the organisation had moved away from the lacklustre staff attitudes and poor quality service it was reputed to provide in the DSS days. Sue Vardon also emphasises the term '*exceptional* service' in this performative representation of Centrelink in a strategy aimed at 'resisting ordinariness' (Maguire, Perryman, Ball and Braun, 2011, p. 1), thereby seeking to persuade multiple audiences of its claims to excellence in a potentially competitive environment.

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'Then Centrelink was born' – social workers' accounts of the transition from one organisational form to another

The social work participants in this study were asked to recall their transition from the traditional public service department DSS to the new government statutory agency, Centrelink. The following discussion explores key themes arising from the social work participants' accounts of the experience of this organisational transformation, using their own words to illustrate a diversity of understandings and responses to the various elements of change. The key themes identified from the social workers' accounts of change during this period of time include: efforts to distance the 'old' organisation from the 'new'; the operation of new private sector strategies such as branding and marketing; the challenges they experienced in relation to new corporate language and related discourses; their participation in efforts to create cultural change; tangible changes that included the design of offices and changes to selection processes and, specific changes to the expectations, roles and priorities of social workers. Each of these themes will be explored below.

To begin with, Skye recalled some of the broad features of change in the following stream of thought that draws on the organisational language of the time:

> Then Centrelink was born! It was all very *exciting*. That's when the CES people came across. It's when the whole marketing thing - from 'client' to 'customer', Sue Vardon, the principle of purchaser-provider started to filter down. Customer-focus interaction. Holistic service delivery. That whole focus back on - 'the customer is the most important thing'. The 'moment of truth' stuff – the kind of business model that talks about 'you are Centrelink on the frontline'. That, 'the customer's experience of Centrelink is what

you're representing'. Customer service surveys came out. Value creation workshops[22] came out; a whole lot of process improvement.

Skye's memories highlight the messages received by Centrelink employees that they were now accountable for the way service users and others assessed the organisation's performance and that each interaction with 'customers' was being actively evaluated and potentially recorded for future evaluation of organisational value. In broader terms, the message suggests that the performance of individual employees at each 'moment of truth' is linked to the success or failure of Centrelink within a contestable environment. Skye was excited about the possibility of the organisation focusing on the needs of service users – a commitment that she and many of the social workers would have valued highly, particularly given their earlier expressions of frustration with the way things were done in DSS days.

Gloria provided a positive appraisal of the nature of the changes to what she refers to as 'the culture' of Centrelink, particularly as they impacted upon the status and value of social workers:

> I think with Sue Vardon, there was a *real* shift in the credibility and value of social workers. I think she made a *huge* difference there. And just the whole culture of the organisation – it was *much* more positive and *much* more client-focused.

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[22] Halligan and Wills (2008, p. 87) explain that value creation workshops were attended by office staff and customers and involved groups of customers ranking what they considered to be the ten most important components of good service and rating their Centrelink office on how it performed on each, while employees listened and watched and rated themselves. Around 10,000 customers across Australia attended these sessions in the first few years of Centrelink.

David recalled the positive responses of local community service providers to the news that Sue Vardon had worked as a social worker/community worker in her early career:

> I remember Sue Vardon was around a bit on corporate television[23]. I think that was the biggest news when Centrelink came in. She happened to have worked as a social worker and community worker at Baulkham Hills Council [Sydney] for a few years and so people were *so* happy in the community because she was someone they could identify with. That sort of helped along the way in building the Centrelink relationship, at least in our area. They said, 'oh, this is a social worker', and it was great for us. I think we felt empowered that we had a social worker heading the organisation…I remember we had a *huge* cake [at the formal launch] and we had the local member come and cut the cake… It was *very* strange [laughs]. I don't remember the specific changes and messages we got at that time. It was kind of insidious. It just happened – it *crept* up on you.

A majority of the social work participants recalled feeling positive in the early days of Centrelink about having a woman in the position of CEO of the new organisation, and optimistic about the fact that she was an [ex-] social worker who spoke about the importance of being responsive to customers' needs. However, that did not necessarily translate into an unequivocal positive regard for all of the changes they encountered, as demonstrated in the accounts below.

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[23] With the introduction of Centrelink, there was a new focus on professionally produced communiqués about change processes viewed by staff across the country through a specially created and branded 'corporate television' service. Centrelink TV was beamed into offices and meeting rooms so that staff could receive regular updates from Sue Vardon and other senior Executive.

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Out with the 'old' and in with the 'new' – defining new identities

Audrey, who spoke in the previous chapter about the positive value of social work in the public service, went on to express a view about what she saw as efforts to distance the new organisation from its public service predecessor:

> Sue Vardon tried to distance us from the old public service because they cast the public service model very negatively and then used that as the comparison. They didn't ever talk about the *positive* values of the public service. 'Process' was a bad word. 'Processing things' - that was *old* public service mentality, just processing. 'Here we are, we're at this coalface and we're engaging and forming partnerships', and a whole lot of other jargon and weasel words and things that were wheeled-out to describe how we operated.

While Audrey was able to clearly articulate in the previous chapter some of the frustrations and challenges she and other social workers faced while working in DSS, she is critical here about what she perceived to be a manipulative strategy to construct and market a new organisational identity in ways that disparaged and dismissed a public service legacy of administering complex income support and employment services policy. Audrey's critique is consistent with another observation she made a little later about the treatment meted out to former Commonwealth Employment Service (CES) staff when they joined the new organisation:

> They [ex-CES workers] were really dedicated, committed workers. They thought they had been doing important work that they valued and they had skills in. They weren't just - I didn't meet any that were just '*ho-hum* public servants'. They felt a *huge* sense of loss and devaluing in that process**.**

Audrey's comments reflect a capacity to hold in balance a critique of organisational systems that were inimical to dignified service relationships, and an acknowledgement that public servants employed to administer government policy could value and be committed to their jobs regardless of the organisational context of that work.

Mary also reflected on the efforts of the Executive to distance the organisation from what was constructed as a 'processing mentality':

> The focus changed from this public service processing type mentality to customer service, and that was the big thing. The big shift in the language as well. Our purpose was to provide quality customer service and to deliver government policy, so it was very much around that - all very corporate-like. I guess it did have a feel of a private sector framework or something like that, and yet we were still in the offices *processing away* [laughs]. It was a slow transition. The move to Centrelink was quite fast but it was still 'business as usual' pretty much. We *still* had to open the doors every day. We *still* had to service the clients.

Mary is referring here to the fact that while there was an effort in place to 'talk-up' the new identity and direction of Centrelink, the organisation was still the first point of contact for people who needed income support payments and related support services due to short-term and long-term life changes that were often distressing and sometimes traumatic. While some staff were optimistic about the messages they were receiving from the new Executive, they were kept busy with mundane but important claim processing tasks associated with establishing eligibility and creating conditions for payment within an unchanged legislative framework.

In relation to marketing approaches that sought to construct a new organisational identity, most of the social work participants recalled receiving a staff orientation

package in the very early days of Centrelink, which in Plato's words, '…was very much about promoting – 'here's a new start!' Peta remembered the launch pack in more colourful terms:

> All I can remember about the launch of Centrelink is the _stupid_ gimmicks and the bits and pieces they handed out – branded cups, stationery and a glossy magazine. I think Centrelink handed us all a branded cup. It was insane _and_ it went rusty (laughs).

Audrey expressed concern about what she saw as the waste of money that went into efforts to get the staff on board at a time of significant staff retrenchment in the new organisation[24]:

> I remember getting a magazine - they were just pictures, hardly any words. We were aghast at the money going into producing these things that were _absolutely_ meaningless to us. There were all these kinds of things to badge us. We were all being _badged_ and _branded_ [laughs]. Every time they gave us all a pen or something else with '_Centrelink_' on it we'd be just, 'Oh god, for heaven's sake just _give_ us the staff we need!'

Claudia represented these marketing approaches in still stronger terms. She recalled learning about a competition for staff to come up with a new name for the organisation as a strategy to promote staff enthusiasm for the move from the transitional _Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency_ to the new corporatised public service agency:

> This American _whizz-bang_ thing! I remember when they were asking staff to nominate names for the Commonwealth Services Delivery Agency. [When

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[24] According to the Commonwealth and Public Sector Union, there were around 5,000 staff cut from Centrelink in the first year of its operation.

the name was announced] I thought, '*Centrelink'!* What are we - a [expletive] *computer* company or something? It was all bullshit! We got a glossy staff magazine - it didn't say anything. It was a marketing ploy. That was the time when we started being told that we don't have to only *work* for Centrelink – we have to *love* it [laughs]!

Claudia's final statement reflects an important insight about a significant change in the way Centrelink employees were invited to identify with their workplace. As public servants, employees were required to be committed to the performance of their designated role and to the quality and probity of their work within clearly delineated, statutory requirements. As employees of Centrelink, they were being called upon to identify in a more partisan way with the organisation *itself*, above and beyond the nature of the public service work they were undertaking on a daily basis.

Centrelink employees were also invited to wear a corporate uniform that was designed along private sector lines to promote a new professional approach to delivering services and a closer identification with the new organisation. Employees were also required for the first time to wear a name badge with a corporate logo. Some social workers chose to wear the corporate uniform for various reasons not explored in detail in this study. Audrey was the only participant to talk about the corporate uniform. She talked about her reluctance to wear the badge outside the office and her struggle with the idea of social workers choosing to wear the corporate uniform:

I was never tempted to wear the corporate uniform[25]. There's some sort of tax-break attached to it or something. It always looks so clearly *Centrelinky* [laughs]. Most of us just wanted to go outside and take off the Centrelink badge and not be identified, so the idea of going out in a Centrelink uniform!

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[25] As of 2013, all employees of the Australian Department of Human Services (Centrelink), including social workers, are *required* to wear the corporate uniform.

I don't like 'corporate'. I don't identify with those corporate things and I
think it's this huge amount of resourcing that goes into that stuff that I could
see other uses for [laughs]. I suppose I did have a problem with social
workers wearing the corporate uniform. It seemed like they were identifying
with - they should *seem* to be a bit different from that, but I think I was
trying to pull myself up there because, why *should* they be any different? …
I think it was *overly* identified. I did feel critical about it but I was trying to
question *why* I was so critical of it.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 620) talk about the way organisational regulation
may be accomplished through 'the self-positioning of employees within
managerially inspired discourses about work and organisation with which they
may become more or less identified and committed'. They go on to cite Tompkins
and Cheney (1985) who claim that organisational identification effectively acts to
'reduce the range of decision, as choice is, in principle, confined to alternatives
that are assessed to be compatible with affirming such identification' (Alvesson
and Willmott, 2002, p. 620). This is an important consideration in exploring the
research questions for this study because the social workers were invited to
become identified with an organisation that was introducing a range of positively
valued service delivery initiatives while at the same time, implementing
increasingly stringent welfare reform initiatives. Those employees who chose to
affirm a solid and uncritical identification with the organisation might have felt
obliged to commit themselves to *all* aspects of the organisation's operations,
including to the detail and spirit of the government policy it was charged with
implementing. The empirical material presented so far and below shows that there
was a diverse range of responses within and between social work participants to
the various strategies aimed at securing their blanket identification with
organisational policies and practices.

Brand Centrelink

A marketing strategy borrowed from the private sector, touched on by Peta and
Audrey above, was the creation and promotion of an organisational 'brand'. In
1997, the Centrelink Communication and Marketing Framework was described
as,

> includ[ing] media management and brand management…to make the brand
> mean something by focusing on associations: friendly, professional and
> consistent…the key to narrowing the gap between perceptions and reality is
> Centrelink's brand positioning strategy'[26].

The application of private sector approaches to marketing was new to the public
service with the inception of Centrelink. Previous information dissemination by
DSS was restricted to the creation of publications that outlined details of income
support eligibility criteria and conditions of payment. In 2002, Hank Jongen, the
National Manager Communication and Marketing, made the following claims
about Centrelink's brand (Jongen, 2001, p. 6):

> Centrelink's brand is one of its greatest assets. As an organisation
> responsible for distributing $47 billion in payments, public confidence is
> vital to Centrelink's future. Against a backdrop in which Australians have,
> over the past ten years lost faith in their institutions (Church, Police, Sport),
> the community need for a brand that 'makes things happen' has never been
> stronger. Few brands or organisations have the ability to occupy a position
> of trust and regard within the Australian psyche. Centrelink has greater
> opportunity than most. Centrelink has taken this to heart. No one individual
> person or group of people in Centrelink manages Centrelink's brand. Every
> individual is responsible, because branding is everything the organisation
> does.

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[26] Internal Centrelink Communication and Marketing Team document.

The social work participants, in the critical edge to their responses to such branding statements and related practices, are picking up on the distinction between the use of language to *inform* and the use of language that seeks to *achieve* something (Fleming and Sturdy, 2003); in this case, to secure the assent and commitment of employees towards the achievement of broad organisational objectives. The first thing that strikes a reader about the language used in branding statements such as the one above is the level of abstraction employed, making it difficult to locate the central issue over which people might argue, thereby acting to stifle dissent. Secondly, the message suggests that the brand *itself* 'makes things happen'. This statement exemplifies the performative intent behind such marketing claims, where by *saying* something, the thing will *happen*.

The specific message behind this branding statement is that all Centrelink employees hold themselves responsible for the organisation's identity and future. In addition, the inflated claim about Centrelink 'occupying a position of trust and regard within the Australian psyche' is clearly embellished for marketing purposes within a contestable environment. In fact, the branding statement seeks to give the impression that this objective had already been achieved, even though measurements of 'customer satisfaction levels' remained stable throughout the early years of Centrelink, despite the changed agenda (Halligan and Wills, 2008, p. 36).

McCabe and Knights (2002, p. 235) argue that management efforts to engage employees' commitment to new organisational discursive practices may 'transform individuals into subjects that secure some sense of their own meaning and identity'. However, they go on to suggest that such efforts can also have the opposite effect, 'resulting in subjects rejecting or distancing themselves from, rather than embracing' the organisation's practices (ibid.). In similar territory, Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 622) assert that managerial discourses can be interpreted as an effort to regulate employees' 'insides': 'their self-image, their feelings and identifications'. Alvesson and Willmott invoke the metaphor of

employee as *identity worker,* who is 'enjoined to incorporate new managerial discourses into narratives of self-identity'. The authors provide examples such as repeated organisational invitations to employees to 'embrace the notion of We (of the organisation)' in an effort to regulate employee identity. Citing Ezzamel, Willmott and Worthington (2000), they argue that such modalities of organisational regulation are not necessarily effective in capturing worker commitment and may in fact have the opposite effect of amplifying cynicism and resistance (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 622). The responses highlighted above from some of the social work participants suggest they felt uncomfortable with Centrelink marketing and branding strategies that sought to secure their blanket commitment to organisational objectives, leading them to resist efforts to chain them to the collective 'We' of conspicuous marketing claims.

'It just seeps into you' – introducing a new language into the public service

> To drive home the new positioning of Centrelink, we introduced the word 'customer' everywhere: customer service officers instead of administrative service officers; customer service centres instead of regional offices; customer segment teams instead of policy or programme branches. This included recognition of internal customers [employees]. Having achieved a customer focus throughout our organisation we are now refining our language to reflect a more personalised service (Vardon, 1999).

The statement above is how Sue Vardon described the rationale for changing the term used to describe Centrelink service users from 'beneficiaries' or 'clients' to 'customers'. In the same presentation, Sue Vardon asserts that the expectations and power of 'the consumer' had risen exponentially, with customers 'now demanding greater choice of access, increased personalisation and more involvement in product design'. She went on to explain that these expectations underpinned what the organisation came to call 'personalised solutions, consistent with government policy' (Vardon, 1999, p. 1). Sue Vardon herself addressed

concerns she heard staff express about some of the private sector initiatives being introduced:

> Every now and then someone says to me, what sort of American textbook have you been reading lately? - if they hear me saying something. But we don't use a whole lot of private sector language. What I'm trying to do is to create a modern public service language.

Peta Fitzgibbon, the National Manager of Social Work in the early years of Centrelink, acknowledged that some social workers struggled with adopting organisational language, 'fearing that this is selling out, not remaining true to our professional base' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 185). She went on to say: 'The challenge for social work in Centrelink, as it was in [DSS], is to position itself to respond creatively and flexibly, redefining and shaping practice to fit the new environment, and contributing positively and innovatively to the agency's performance' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 189).

McDonald and Chenoweth (2009, p. 157) interpret the use of corporate language by social workers somewhat differently, arguing that in adopting the language and related practices of NPM, social workers are 'participating in the reconstruction of service users' identity from that of rights-bearing citizens with legitimate claims on the state, to an enfeebled form of customer'. Their analysis is based on an understanding that language has constitutive effects - that it 'constitutes the social world, including the identities of people' (McDonald and Chenoweth, 2009, p. 156). In other words, language creates and influences the world-view of social workers and defines the way they view service users, thereby influencing the focus and nature of their practice.

Consistent with findings in McDonald and Chenoweth's earlier study of Centrelink social workers, many of the participants in this study used the term 'customer' with ease throughout their narratives of change (McDonald and

Chenoweth, 2008). The exceptions were Peta and Claudia who both said they refused to use the word at all, and Audrey, who talked about 'stumbling' with the term, as discussed further below. In an earlier publication, Catherine McDonald (2006, p. 8) argued that social workers 'should not be passive and uncritical recipients of policy and management prescriptions' such as 'customisation', but should instead be '*knowing actors*, well aware of what's happening and why' [emphasis in the original].

The participants in this study were not asked directly why they used the term 'customer' but for some, the reason might be inferred from their narratives. For example, Gloria felt excited when she looked back on what she referred to, using the language of the organisation at the time, as efforts to 'put the customer at the centre of the whole experience':

> There was a much bigger focus on collaboration with clients, that customers were seen as - there was a lot of attempt to put them at the *centre* of the whole experience. That this was our whole reason for being – 'we are a customer service organisation - we want to treat them really well - we want to get the best outcomes for them'. Which is what we as social workers had always *wanted* to do, and *tried* to do. So there was a real feeling that we're all on the same track. Social workers were really an integral part of the organisation rather than being a little isolated unit, and it was more - the *others* were all coming on board. And I'm really amazed at some of the things I've seen staff here do to help people. It *really* blows me away!

Gloria provides a positive appraisal of organisational efforts to 'treat [customers] really well' and believes that Centrelink's focus on 'customer service' brought social workers in from the margins to play a valued role in achieving one of the key organisational objectives. Gloria stumbles in the first part of her statement over the use of terms, starting out with the term 'client' when talking about a collaborative relationship, then slipping back into the use of the term 'customer' when referring to the messages given to staff by the organisation about cultural

change. Gloria also returns here to what she interprets as an alignment between social work values and organisational practices, particularly those that relate to improving the quality of interactions with service users. Her words suggest the value she places on social workers being an integral part of the organisation – a sense of *belonging* that comes with an identification with other staff and with selected components of the organisational mandate, namely 'customer focused' interactions.

Audrey talks about her own experience of 'stumbling' at times with the terms she uses to describe people who use Centrelink services:

> It was just this whole kind of language that was being imposed on the welfare system as if it was a market that consumers had choice in. …We weren't allowed to call people 'clients' any more because we had 'client departments' who made the policies that we delivered. And we were very critical about the word 'customer' and how it didn't apply to the people we were seeing. Eventually, even those of us who resisted it - I resisted it strongly at first but eventually I was calling people customers. It just *seeps* into you…Even though in the back of your mind - I've always maintained this thing that I *never* think of them as customers. I might *use* that word, and it's partly about being understood within the culture but I always think in my head - something else. For me, 'service user' is the preferred term. I don't even like the term 'client' very much. But 'service user' is the word… So when I'm talking to social workers - *that's* what I'll use. But if I'm talking to somebody else in the organisation, and I want them to know what I'm talking about, I'll use 'customer'. I used to stumble over it a bit but not so much now. Now I have these two different languages going.

It is clear from Audrey's account that she is able to recognise the way that language is imposed on employees through a normative strategy focused on how things *ought* to be, and how such language can 'seep into you', even when employees have a strong critique of the political environment. Audrey

demonstrates here an awareness of the constitutive function of language in its broad sense but she is also able to make what she sees as an active choice about the strategic use of organisational language in her daily work.

McDonald and Chenoweth (2009) may be justified in suggesting that regardless of the motives behind the adoption by social workers of corporate language, the outcome remains the same: that the organisation is not challenged to reflect on the inappropriate use of this label when service users have limited choice about the situations they are placed in due to broader political and economic factors. This goes to the heart of a debate about 'resistance' within NPM inspired organisational change.

Thomas and Davies (2005b, p. 711) ask the questions: '*What* counts as resistance?' and '*When* does resistance count?' Prasad and Prasad (2000, p. 387/388) make a distinction between 'formal' forms of resistance, defined as 'organised worker protests, strikes, grievances, output restrictions, etc.', and 'informal' or 'routine' forms of resistance, that they refer to as 'less visible and more indirect forms of opposition that can take place within the everyday worlds of organisations'. Thomas and Davies (2005b, p. 712) refer to 'all or nothing' analyses of resistance as pessimistic readings of what constitutes 'real' resistance. Drawing on poststructuralist feminist understandings, they seek instead to move away from analyses that they see as constructing workers as 'economically and environmentally determined', to explore resistance as 'complex and nuanced struggles around subjectivities and meaning'.

The social work accounts above represent three different approaches to responding to the call to adapt to a new language and way of conceptualising their work with service users. Some participants incorporated the new concepts into their daily practice because they chose to interpret them as being consistent with their professional value stance. Others chose to actively resist attempts to secure their enthusiasm for new corporate symbols and practices, while others adopted a

critical vigilance while using the language when they felt it was necessary to connect with non-social work colleagues. It could be argued that these choices indicate active decision-making – at least in the accounts represented in this study – about how to engage with change, rather than a passive and unreflective adoption of NPM discourses.

Cultural change: new attitudes, new behaviours and new expectations

Another significant change theme identified by the social work participants was their role in supporting organisational 'cultural change management'. The specific strategy social workers were called upon to support was the embedding of a new 'customer-centred' focus within the organisation and within each of its employees. As discussed above, cultural change was considered necessary by the Centrelink Executive to distinguish the 'new' enterprising and customer-centred focus of Centrelink from the 'old' bureaucratic and 'processing mentality' of DSS. In Sue Vardon's words: 'There had to be symbols that this would be different' (Vardon interview, cited in Halligan and Wills, 2008, p. 35).

Sue Vardon (1999b) described the role for social workers in cultural change in the following terms:

> Our challenge is to provide our staff with the training and understandings to enable them to work in this new way…Social workers without doubt have a key role in progressing what is a fundamental cultural shift in the way we provide services to our customers.

The role for social workers in cultural change came to be formalised within a 'service offer' [27] to Centrelink by the National Social Work Service in the following terms: '[Social workers] will work to develop and implement training

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[27] A 'service offer' was a formal statement of functions and priorities for the Centrelink social work service.

and development strategies to achieve effective cultural change and excellence in customer service' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 183). The social work participants talked about a number of 'cultural change management' initiatives they were invited to engage with in the early years of Centrelink. These initiatives were generally focused on assisting office managers to train and support 'customer-centred' staff interactions with service users. Social workers were also required to assist office managers to forge connections with local community service providers, directed towards achieving collaboration between government and non-government service providers to achieve welfare reform 'participation' objectives (Winkworth, 2006).

Gloria talked about social workers becoming more valuable to the organisation at this time through their support for office change management strategies:

> Social workers were doing a lot of staff training and coaching around dealing with aggressive customers and trying to explain the social work role and how we could help. I think we were seen as a useful resource there. And the local leadership [management] teams – I think that's when social workers became more valued. I think at any time of major change like this there would have been a few people in the office who decided to go - people who didn't cope very well with change. I can remember receiving a lot of material about change management and the different ways people cope with change. Social workers were expected to help the managers deal with the different ways that people responded to change. There were celebration-like lunches and things like that.

Plato made the point that social workers had to not only support organisational cultural change efforts, they had to undergo changes *themselves* in doing so:

> It's a lot of that *invisible* work. It was things that perhaps we didn't draw attention to. And, I guess, when you're a minority presence it's a lot more

difficult to say that we've got social workers in every site helping with cultural change. At the same time, we had to change *ourselves* too at those times.

All of the social work participants supported an organisational push to promote a more dignified experience for service users – a variation of the organisational language at the time that talked in more limited terms about promoting 'excellence in customer service'. However, there was a level of disagreement amongst the social workers about the organisational strategies that were employed in the process of doing so. There was also a level of disappointment expressed by some of the participants about what they saw as a lack of opportunity to express a critique within the social work network about matters of strategy in responding to managerially defined objectives, as explored further below.

The participants were generally less critical of some of the more tangible changes made in the name of cultural change in the early years of Centrelink, including:

- the replacement of high counters with purpose built sit-down bays;
- the removal of 'back offices' so that all staff sat within close proximity to the public contact area;
- the development of open plan offices, albeit with concerns expressed about the limited privacy for service users and staff in a highly charged and sometimes dangerous public contact environment;
- a new system of recruiting and promoting administrative staff on the basis of their 'customer-centred' values and skills, rather than on their administrative abilities;
- service by pre-booked appointment for the first time, and
- community 'out-servicing' initiatives that involved taking services outside the office in specific situations, such as to supported accommodation sites and hospitals.

The participants generally valued these changes because they resulted in tangible improvements to the quality of interactions between staff and service users. A number of the participants mentioned their initial fears for administrative colleagues' safety as a consequence of opening-up the public contact area, only to find that there was a noticeable reduction in service user frustration and expression of anger due to the range of changes identified above.

Shared values and shared behaviours

Halligan and Wills (2008, p. 76/77), describe the development and promotion within Centrelink of a charter of 'shared behaviours' to enhance cultural change. These shared behaviours were defined through five 'shared values' that included: 'listening to customers and the community; mutual respect for customers and each other; behaving ethically and with integrity; identifying innovative ways to provide the right outcome, and problem solving and developing opportunities' (Centrelink, 1997, pp. 8-10).

Sue Vardon (1999, p. 3) described the Centrelink Shared behaviours in the following way:

> Centrelink people know what is expected of them through the Centrelink Shared Behaviours – a key set of behaviours which govern work practices, decision making and our dealings with internal and external customers. This is linked to performance processes with the provision for advancement within the structure based on annual assessment of performance that considers agreed work objectives linked to Centrelink's business goals, as well as Centrelink's Shared Behaviours.

Plato expressed a positive view of the Shared Behaviours statements and was able to see some alignment with codified social work values and ethics:

> I think that was probably the first time, most visibly and most overtly we even got to see things like a 'value base', and the interactions we have with people aren't just about a process but they should be underpinned by a charter, by certain behaviours, like 'shared behaviours'… And I think also, social workers needed to see that just as you have with the case of 'participation', that there's an alignment between things like, say 'shared behaviours' and processes that put human dignity at the forefront. That pretty much draws on our AASW Code of Ethics and our own value base.

Audrey wasn't so sure:

> We had the 'shared behaviours' and 'shared values', and all that. We all had to be able rattle-off the shared behaviours. They were all around the walls, in meeting rooms and tearooms, and posters with horrible looking pictures. I remember that we were really critical of the way in which this was just being sold as this monolithic thing - the whole shared behaviours thing. When you look at it, it's all just motherhood statements. Who could disagree with the fact that 'we listen' and 'we behave with integrity' and so on? It's just that it's the kind of bland, monolithic statements. I remember having conversations with social work colleagues about the difference between the organisational culture that was *espoused* and on show in that way, and the *actual* culture-in-use: that 'overt' and 'covert' culture. The 'overt' culture is very much around those sorts of motherhood statements but the reality of what was being lived-out was very different to that. People weren't feeling they were in partnership around *anything*, and it *wasn't* like that.

Plato and Audrey acknowledge the importance of having a value base informing organisational practices that is underpinned by notions of human dignity/integrity. Plato recognised this as an example of social work values influencing the

direction of the organisation while Audrey departs views at this point to reinforce the gap between the values and behaviours expected from staff and the reality of daily practices. Audrey was critical of what she saw as a gap between the managerial rhetoric about supporting 'internal customers' - a term used by the Executive to mean 'employees' - through cultural change, and what she saw as contradictory messages from Sue Vardon about the need to weed-out employees who struggled with these new expectations, either in terms of their interventions with service users or their wholesale commitment to organisational objectives. In Audrey's words:

> The *toughness* that was there - that *really* hard line about, 'if you don't like it, you know where the door is'. That came across really clearly at the time. 'We are new, we're really different, we're forging ahead in this direction, and if you're not on board with all this stuff, well, get out of here'. 'Yes you can have a choice: it's my way or the highway' [laughs]! And if you were critical - if you had a critique, it didn't matter how constructive you might have been. If you had a critique of *any* kind, you really had to think, 'is this the place for me?' Some people *did* actually make a decision to go at that point. I know some social workers made that decision because they thought, 'no, this is just ridiculous'.

At this point, Audrey raised a related issue about what she saw as a lack of critical discussion amongst the extended social work group about issues of strategy and social work responses to managerial imperatives:

> We had a lot of people acting in the position of Business Manager Social Work at that time. Maybe because they were acting in the position, they were trying to act as if they were corporate enough or something, or they were under various pressures. Anyway, they were seemingly on board, or at least, if not in their *hearts* on board, needing to *seem* that way and to remind us that *we* needed to seem that way. I used to get really annoyed that as a

group of social workers we couldn't really talk to each other - as if we didn't
need to worry about that. Because, we're talking to *each other* here! We
might have to tailor our language *out there*, but at least, can we talk to each
other as if we've got these particular values and we have a political critique
here? That used to really cause me angst. I used to feel very anxious. I
remember coming out of social work meetings thinking - just feeling really
disgruntled, and 'oh god, why can't we talk to *each other* as if we were
social workers? I think it was around issues to do with - we were being
asked to do something, or to take on some 'beautiful' new role, or to lose
some role, changes around what we did. And I used to regret the fact that we
couldn't always have proper critical discussions about that. There were some
social workers who were always just resigned to our fate, and it was just: 'oh
well, that's the decision, it's happening now, we just have to *go* with it'.
And then, 'it's too late now, the decision's already been made - there's no
use even discussing it'. You know, you couldn't have a discussion.

Audrey's point is reproduced in its entirety because she raises a number of issues
of relevance to the experience of organisational regulation of employee identity.
Audrey begins by acknowledging that social workers, as a collective, were under
a degree of pressure to be *seen* to be 'on board' with corporate objectives in order
for the social work network to remain viable within a contestable environment
where social work services could have been outsourced. However, she expresses
disappointment through her question, '…*why can't we talk to each other as if we
were social workers*?', that some social workers could not, or would not discuss
contrary views within spaces distant from the gaze of management and other
organisational colleagues. Audrey's question reflects an understanding that the
social work profession exists as a community of practice with certain codified
commitments to think critically about their organisational context and to address
service provision responsibilities within the workplace[28].

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[28] AASW *Code of Ethics* 2010, Section 5.4 – 'Responsibilities in the workplace'.

The nature of Audrey's concerns could be interpreted as evidence of the success at this time of a process of normative control through which collective social work consent to managerial changes was secured without significant resistance. In this environment, social work management may have felt it is necessary to exercise power in ways that influenced and regulated 'the production of consent through enacting a particular form of organisational experience' (Kärreman and Alvesson. 2004, p. 152) in order to protect the service from attrition. Another interpretation might view this situation arising through a more organic process in which individual social workers identified benefits for themselves and the Centrelink social work service through actively participating in organisational processes that they saw as being aligned with their own personal and professional commitments. Whatever the case here, if Audrey is correct, it appears that 'proper critical discussion' was foreclosed and some social workers in the group felt aggrieved and marginalised.

In a similar vein, Claudia highlighted divisions that began to occur between social workers in their different evaluations of, and responses to, the organisational identity that was being projected:

> I remember that the whole [social work] selection criteria changed. It was all about 'leadership' and 'business acumen'. I remember going for interviews and talking, and having the [selection] panel look at me and saying to me – 'we don't know what you're talking about' - because I was questioning the language. I was saying to them that the whole language is foreign. I said, 'we're not in a business, we're providing services to the public'. Some of the young, more managerial type social workers were very good at using the language, but there wasn't much imagination there. They were very good in communication skills and the concepts that the organisation wanted from them. If you questioned that - as you can probably imagine, I'm very outspoken normally - you become labelled as someone who's negative and critical and outspoken… I used to look at social workers at our meetings and to be very honest, I'd think, 'what's wrong with those social workers'? Why

do you take on this stuff? Why aren't you critical? Aren't we *supposed* to be
critical?

Claudia makes explicit statements in this account about *who* she sees herself as
being and *what* she thinks the collective social work service *ought* to be – more
'outspoken' and more 'critical'. She also implies a broader distinction between
her way of being and some of the 'young, more managerial types of social
workers'. Claudia recognises that in taking a critical approach, she risks being
labelled as negative within a workplace culture oriented to enterprise and positive
regard for organisational objectives.

Each of the social work participants talked at various points throughout their
narratives about their own perception of their identity as an individual, as a social
worker and as an organisational member. While not suggesting that any of the
social work participants embodied an essential social work identity that defines
their individual organisational practice, it is clear from reading through the
narratives that each social worker values certain ways of thinking and being and
feels affiliated with certain perspectives, practices and people within the
organisation, while seeking to distance themselves from other perspectives and
'types' of social workers.

Stefan Sveningsson and Mats Alvesson (2003, p. 1164) argue that identities of
individuals in contemporary organisational contexts are frequently in movement
and in a process of 'becoming' within discursive contexts to which individuals
relate themselves. They go on to suggest that this is a process in which individuals
create several 'more or less contradictory and often changing identity positions'
rather than 'one stable, continuous and secure, identity' (Sveningsson and
Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). Drawing upon the earlier work of Alvesson and
Willmott (2002), Sveningsson and Alvesson focus on the concept of 'identity
work' as a response to managerial efforts to regulate identity within workplaces
through cultural mechanisms that seek to obtain employee commitment,

involvement and loyalty. The authors' focus on identity work emphasises ongoing struggles in creating a sense of self and providing temporary answers to the question 'who am I?' (or 'who are we?') and what do I (we) stand for?' (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1168).

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 624) suggest that 'organisational identification, manifest in employee loyalty, cannot be presumed or taken for granted but has to be actively engendered or manufactured'. In the case of the situations described above by Audrey and Claudia (and others not reproduced here), efforts to engender consent and organisational identification appear to operate through social and normative processes in which a majority of social workers agree to managerial directives in return for the security of continuing organisational influence and perhaps, material and symbolic rewards for individuals and for the collective social work service.

In situations such as the ones described by Audrey and Claudia above, identification with the organisation is strengthened for some social workers while others may distance themselves from aspects of the organisation and draw upon other sources of self-definition, for example a 'critical questioner' identity. This may be a process undertaken individually, or as an interactive and social process whereby individuals identify and petition allies in relation to specific issues of importance to them. Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 626) refer to this dynamic as 'triggering of intensive identity work', in which…a particular identity is defended and strengthened against experienced attack'. It could be argued that this identity work reflects unstable and shifting individual and interpersonal identifications that may result from a desire to maintain a coherent sense of self in the face of complex workplace experiences and frequent change.

Plato reflected on issues of collective social work identity and micro-level responses within Centrelink in the following statement:

> You can't work for Centrelink if you don't want to implement government policy. That's one of the realities we all need to face. But I think in Centrelink…it's not the big-ticket social change. It's not glamorous, but when you look at what we actually *do*, it is perhaps a little bit more significant. Social work in Centrelink has often had its identity defined by others because you have to implement government policy, and we're contracted to undertake certain types of work. So we're always going to have a certain – we're going to have *other* people define our space in terms of *what* we do, but *how* we do it is much more liberating for us. Whether we can always appreciate that link, I'm not sure.

Chapter Review

Chapter Five drew from organisational texts and transcripts of social work interviews to provide an account of the ways in which organisational expectations were understood and responded to by key agents in this study. It was proposed that organisational texts, including those produced by the Executive and senior public servants, including social work managers, transmitted performative expectations to a range of stakeholders in ways that sought to engage their responsiveness towards achieving organisational goals. These processes of engagement, it was argued, went beyond external regulatory efforts to direct employees. Instead, these efforts to engage public servant commitment employed cultural mechanisms targeted at employee identifications and self-regulation. This involved efforts to capture and sustain employee values, commitments and motivation during a period of significant workplace and policy transformation.

Expectations were documented within organisational texts and promoted to employees, inviting them to: move away from so-called rule-bound, inflexible,

bureaucratic thinking to become more innovative and entrepreneurial in their approaches to delivering services and administering policy; actively develop strategies to meet 'customer' expectations within a context of personalisation and customisation; and, to become more productive through drawing on their enthusiasm and regard for the organisation by suggesting creative new approaches to meeting organisational goals within a workplace increasingly influenced by the discourses of productivity and individualisation.

Social workers were similarly drawn into these expectations to demonstrate their value to the organisation, even if it was only to *be seen* to be on board with some organisational requirements, through playing an active role in achieving managerial definitions of cultural change. Some of the participants talked about responding enthusiastically to the achievement of 'customer-centred' reforms because they felt that in sharing their values and knowledge, they were becoming more influential and valued as professionals. Some of the participants perceived coherence between collective social work values and the values of the organisation, at least in relation to its renewed focus on more dignified service relationships.

The responses described by the social workers in this study suggest they engaged in active processes of deliberation at the individual and collective level in order to reconcile individual, occupational and professional commitments and values in their efforts to become reconciled with organisational complexity and change. The diversity apparent in their accounts of responses to change demonstrates differences *between* social workers, as well as *within* individual social workers in their daily negotiation of workplace challenges. This involved balancing personal, interpersonal, social, professional, political and pragmatic considerations in order to respond to efforts to reconstruct their identities within Centrelink.

Claudia expressed a view that was held by a number of the social work participants in this study in her statement:

> On the one hand, they were talking about Centrelink as a new organisation, focused on servicing the 'customer' better. 'We are providing a holistic approach, it's not just about income support, we're giving our customers options, etc.'. On the other hand, we became more and more punitive - more demanding, more controlling. So how does one reconcile with the other?

The next chapter moves on to explore the regulation of social work performances within Centrelink in a context that became increasingly challenging for social workers in terms of reconciling their statutory role as policy practitioners tasked with implementing increasingly punitive welfare reform initiatives, and their professional role as advocates and champions of humane service interactions. This period heralded a change in balance between self-regulation and external regulation of employee workplace performances. It could be argued that in becoming more demanding and more controlling of service users, social workers themselves – along with their management and administrative colleagues - faced more demands and more external control in relation to their own organisational performances.

CHAPTER SIX: 'If you do that sort of thing, you're a *standout* sort of social worker': Engagement with a new performative regime

Introduction

The previous chapter highlighted a diverse range of social work responses to new operational processes that sought to regulate Centrelink public servant identities in order to make them more responsive to achieving government reforms. Chapter Six moves on to explore a different but related set of organisational processes that operated to regulate workplace *performances* within a performative regime focused on measurement, comparison and evaluation of employee and work unit value. It will be argued that the balance between self-regulation and external regulation of organisational performances changed conspicuously during the period under investigation for this study as the government ratcheted-up expectations of public servant responsiveness towards implementing increasingly stringent welfare reform strategies. This discussion is set within a time period that saw the abolition of the Centrelink Board of Management and the subsequent resignation of Sue Vardon in December 2004. These changes led to the resurrection of a more traditional machinery of bureaucracy and a renewed focus on externally imposed technologies of public service discipline.

Social workers as 'performance subjects'

As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, a particular articulation of 'performativity' developed by Stephen Ball has been employed to analyse organisational texts and social work participant accounts of responses to processes of organisational regulation of performances within Centrelink. Stephen Ball works within the field of educational sociology in Britain to analyse policy interventions and how they have changed the face of the school and higher

education sectors, particularly in relation to issues of social inequality. Ball (2003, p. 217) explains that his motivation for working in this field of scholarship is '[to] get behind the objective façade of this aspect of public sector reform and its technical rationalities to examine the subjectivities of change and changing subjectivities which are threatened or required or brought about by performativity'. Ball attends to performative processes within educational workplace cultures influenced by managerialism, commodification and marketisation and how these processes impact upon professionals. Ball (2008, p. 51) describes performativity as 'the work that performance management systems do on the subjectivities of individuals'. He goes on to say:

> Performativity invites and incites us to make ourselves more effective, to work on ourselves to improve ourselves and to feel guilty or inadequate if we do not. It operates within a framework of judgements within which what is improvement is determined for us, against which we are expected to position ourselves…Performativity 'works' most powerfully when it is inside our heads and our souls (Ball, 2008, p. 51).

Ball's final statement here reflects his analytical interest in going beyond evaluations focused on externally prescribed and imposed performance criteria to incorporate an 'emotional status domain' that is highly personal to professionals…'[e]xpressed in the lexicons of belief and commitment, service and even love, and of mental health and emotional well-being' (Ball, 2003, p. 216). Ball argues that performativity operates from two directions: from the 'outside in' and from the 'inside-out' (Ball, 2000, p. 4). By the 'outside-in' Ball refers to 'ratings and rankings, set within competition between groups *within* institutions that can act to engender individual feelings of pride, guilt, shame and envy'. By the 'inside-out', he means performances that are '…aimed at culture building, the instilling of pride, and an identification with a belief in the quality of the services provided (Ball, 2000, p. 4). Together, these forms of regulation, according to Ball, have a social and interpersonal dimension that relates to complex institutional,

team, group and communal relations (Ball, 2000, p. 4). In the case of this study, this interpersonal dimension could include social workers evaluating each others' practice and ethics, making judgements about what they value in their colleagues' work practices and drawing on individual and team performances to maintain team morale. Ball's perspective, in its focus on the social and interpersonal dimensions of performative responses, goes beyond existing accounts that focus on the disciplinary effects of conventional performance management processes.

Ball's concerns are consistent with an interest identified within the field of social work by Catherine McDonald (2006) in her focus on social work engagement with performance management regimes. McDonald speculates that instrumental approaches to performance measurement have 'the potential to transform the professional identity projected by social work'. McDonald concluded that this claim is…'as yet, just that – a claim which awaits empirical investigation' (McDonald, 2006, p. 26). The study undertaken for this thesis takes up this challenge in an effort to contribute to theorising in this area.

By way of definition, Michael Strain (2009) makes a useful distinction between what he refers to as an organisational 'orientation to performance' (p. 74): 'the political/structural regime of *performance*, reinforced by audit and inspection', and the 'cultural/structural domain of *performativity*' [emphasis added] which he argues introduces a 'self-actualizing dimension…affording a creative mode of individual resistance to the 'solitarizing implications of performance and control' (pp. 79/80). This distinction highlights the active work that professionals may engage in as individuals or as collectives to negotiate workplace expectations that seek to produce particular types of professional performances, for example in the case of this study, the 'entrepreneurial' public servant social worker. The following discussion begins with a focus on the cultural/structural domain of performativity as it relates to social work within Centrelink and moves on to what became a more muscular political/structural regime of performance measurement resulting from the organisational governance changes referred to above.

The imperative to 'add value' in a context of contestability

The concept of 'contestability' was described in earlier chapters of this thesis as a driving force for many of the material and symbolic reforms made to and by Centrelink. The concept of contestability, as defined in Chapter One, is the threat of competition in areas where traditionally the market cannot accommodate a number of suppliers. It was argued that the regime of contestability allowed the government to define parameters for success and to use the environment it created to ensure policy compliance, flexibility and lower costs. According to Kathy MacDermott (2008, p. 25), the Australian federal government promoted the discipline of contestability as a means of increasing cost-effectiveness for the tax paying public, because it was now up to public servants to prove that they could offer the services required of them as efficiently and effectively as the private sector. The question arising out of the adoption of this principle for MacDermott is the operational balance that needs to be struck at all levels of the public service between responsiveness and crossing the line towards partisan marketing approaches (McDermott, 2008 p. 38).

All of the social workers in this study identified pressures arising from frequent reminders in the early days of Centrelink that they could not take for granted the continuation of the organisation in its present form. Claudia pointed to the existence of an 'ideological shift' by which '… you make staff fearful of losing their jobs and then you can control them'. David referred to the precedent set by the abolition of the Commonwealth Employment Service in 1997:

> There was always that fear thing there in those days that because of contestability, Centrelink was not protected. And we'd seen the thing that the CES was almost disbanded overnight, so we had a real example that an organisation like the CES could disappear. So, what was to say that Centrelink wouldn't go as well? So there was that fear – the seed was sown about that. I think everyone felt, right from the top - from National Office,

those flavours were being passed on and managers *had* to do things and there were performance improvement plans put in place.

Gloria talked about a strategy adopted by Centrelink to respond to the threat of outsourcing of some or all of its key functions:

Centrelink's approach was to go out and get us more business. So Centrelink just keeps taking on more and more business. The weird and wonderful things that Centrelink does! I think that was how they countered the risks associated with contestability. I remember at one point there was talk about, 'will social workers stay or not?' And we thought, well Sue Vardon values social workers, so I didn't think we were too much at risk.

Peta referred to a change in the way social workers started talking about their own value and worth to the organisation in the context of a contestable environment:

Social workers started talking about themselves as being expensive. 'We're an expensive commodity – we should really being doing things to demonstrate that we're worth it'. Social work was very much under that pressure for a number of years when Centrelink came in. I still hear social workers say this now [in 2008]. 'We're an expensive commodity – we really should be doing X, Y and Z to demonstrate that we're worth it'.

Peta Fitzgibbon, National Manager Social Work in the early years of Centrelink explained that the social work service was challenged to re-make itself through the adoption of what Centrelink referred to as 'value added' activities, in order to give the organisation a competitive edge within this contestable environment (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 185). One of the components of 'value adding' identified by the National Social Work Service at the time was the development by social workers of 'business acumen' and the negotiation of new business activities for the social work service based on principles of innovation and entrepreneurship.

Sue Vardon as CEO described innovation and entrepreneurship in Centrelink in the following terms:

> The only people who never make mistakes are those who never try anything. We actively encourage innovation and entrepreneurship in Centrelink. Innovation and entrepreneurship, by definition, lead an organisation into new territory. Mistakes are made. It is important that the lessons of mistakes are learnt and the learning is available for those who follow. This is the essence of a learning organisation. We are not there yet but we are working to put in place attitudes that enable people to be innovative without fear of punishment if they get it wrong' (Vardon, 1999a).

A number of the social work participants in this study talked about the chances taken by themselves or by other social workers in response to this call to be more creative and enterprising. For example, David had a lingering memory of Sue Vardon's encouragement to staff to take risks and to 'give things a go':

> I remember when [Sue Vardon] came to our office and said, 'I want you to give things a go'. One of her statements, which *still* sticks in my memory was that 'it's better to say sorry than to ask for permission' [laughs]. That was very powerful for us. I think for me it was really a message that I *still* carry with me. Those things slowly, slowly snowballed.

To some of the social work participants, this exhortation to be more innovative represented a new freedom to undertake creative work they had wanted to do since moving from the more circumspect public service environment of DSS. To Peta Fitzgibbon, this constituted organisational permission for social work to assume the identity of an 'enterprising profession', requiring the active engagement of social workers with the competitive environment.

Peta Fitzgibbon (2000, p. 158) acknowledged the challenges for social workers of working in this increasingly competitive and hostile environment:

> It is undoubtedly the case that many aspects of the competitive environment that we face are in conflict with the core values of the profession, and involve practitioners in contradictory and stressful situations. However…the essence of social work is that it is engaged in, and seeks to be engaged in, those social institutions that are involved in the complex relations between society and the disadvantaged, excluded and marginalised individuals and groups. Social work should also be engaged in processes of analysis and critique, resistance and development of alternatives – but not as a substitute for engagement.

She went on to argue that this level of active engagement required social workers to adopt a 'pro-active stance of continuously looking for new opportunities for professional practice' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 159). She qualified here that she was not suggesting social work should adopt the values of 'free enterprise', nor - responding to a critical statement by Jim Ife (1997, p. 24) that it was about trying to 'fit comfortably within the system'. Instead, Fitzgibbon argued that social work should be '…enterprising in its attempts to apply social work values in an increasingly competitive and often hostile environment' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 162).

The National Social Work Service went on to take active steps to encourage Centrelink social workers to adopt an enterprising stance towards their work through the adoption of what was termed 'enterprise practice and review' processes. This approach committed the nationally dispersed social work service to review current work practices to identify opportunities to 'increase their range of business and demonstrate their value to the core business of Centrelink in proportion to the cost of the service' (Fitzgibbon, 2000, p. 184). A document was developed in 1999 to support social workers to pursue new 'business

opportunities.'[29] Social workers were required to pass all ideas for new business through the National Manager of Social Work to obtain clearance from the CEO. Social workers were encouraged to work in partnership with local community based services to develop new 'business' opportunities that were consistent with existing Centrelink priorities, which at the time were focused on aspects of the Welfare to Work policy agenda. These partnerships were to be locationally specific and were required to meet the particular needs of the local community. The general aim of these partnerships was for Centrelink to work together with local service providers to 'solve a problem' that was impacting on service users' capacity to find self-sustaining employment.

Audrey found herself frustrated at times with what she perceived to be a limited critique by social work management of organisational pressures on the social work service to refocus its efforts towards the achievement of contested welfare reform initiatives.

> Social Work Management has got enough knowledge about the complexity of things to realise - they don't agree that it's that simple and they *do* see how these things can really negatively impact on people and groups. But I suppose they have this view that, 'well, we can raise certain things but we have to be careful how we do that in this climate'. They're aware at that level - they even say things like, '*the sharks are circling'* [laughs]. The political environment has to be taken into account. They have to have sensitive radar for that. So we know - there's this sense you get from talking to them that they understand our critique and they're aware of the concerns and they carefully and strategically try to address some of these things, but they have to be really careful how they do it to maintain the credibility and so on of the social work service and so ensure there continues to *be* a social work service. But there's this sense that some of it may be quite an exaggerated thing in terms of, 'we won't be here if we're troublemakers'.

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[29] Titled: New Business Principles for the Social Work Service – an internal Centrelink document.

Audrey's concerns centre on a perception that the complexity of service users' lives was not being factored into government policy or organisational service delivery strategies within Centrelink. She acknowledges the political climate in which the organisation is enmeshed but she represents a view expressed by a number of the social workers in this study that their professional commitment to individual and systemic advocacy was being eroded within the contestable environment.

An enterprising approach to adding social work value

Most of the social workers interviewed for this study said they were not directly involved in submitting ideas for new business. However, most of them recalled efforts by other social workers to participate in enterprising activities. Most of the participants conflated 'enterprise' with 'community partnerships'. Plato pointed out that before the social work service could pursue new enterprising activities, it was necessary to identify existing social work roles and tasks that were not 'adding value' to Centrelink's core business, in order to make space for new 'value adding' endeavours. In Plato's words:

> I think, out of challenge comes opportunity. Do you batten down the hatches and say, 'we'll keep our space and we'll draw the wagons around' or do you actually take some risks if things are contestable? We were limited by the fact that we ourselves couldn't agree on some of the work we should and shouldn't do. [As an Area group we had meetings about]…'what can we get rid of'? You might start out with 'let's get rid of ten things, but social workers were saying, 'but this…, but that…, but that…' You'd end up with nine things you still need to do and the one thing we got rid of would save us five minutes.

David talked about running a group for sole parent women who were suddenly required to start thinking about returning to the workforce:

> I ran a group [that was focused on assisting women to find work]. That was quite interesting. Now we were able to do all of these things. We had this whole sense that women were going to be encouraged back into work but they weren't yet ready, so we'll go with this *softer* approach and help them to build their skills slowly, and help build their self-esteem and confidence. So that was the approach that I was taking. It was about one social worker having an idea, literally speaking to a few agency workers from the relationships you had. It was just local – a *purely* local initiative. We probably had to get permission from the Manager Social Work, but anything that was a good idea - anything where you would be in the *limelight* [laughs] - something that would *show off* that you did something different.

David suggested, half jokingly, that ideas for adding value were evaluated on the basis of their capacity to put social workers 'in the limelight' or to 'show off that you did something different' – an aspect of enterprise that was taken up by both Peta and Audrey. Peta recalled a similar (but different) programme run by another social worker called 'Women in Transition[30]', involving a group of six to eight migrant women who met over a number of weeks to develop skills in making bath products as a potential pathway into establishing a self-supporting business:

> I thought it was a bit 'light-on'. This social worker *really* put a lot of energy and effort and an awful lot of hours into this project. I think she was thinking that if they could sustain it, if the momentum was there within the

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[30] According to the 2002-2003 *Centrelink Annual Report*, the aim of the Women In Transition Project was to provide a forum for socially disadvantaged women to participate in craft and personal development activities, facilitate social integration, learn new skills, increase self-reliance, and build the community's social capital. The women participated in a nine-week TAFE Certificate course in health and beauty products, learning about women's health, vocational and small business options, financial services and Centrelink services.

organisation, then she could have replicated that year after year. But it just fell in a heap – partly because she moved on, and partly because the social worker who followed in her position probably wasn't interested. I *do* remember it being a huge time commitment and I was happy for that to happen, although I did have my own private questions about whether it was going very far. I never told the social worker involved directly that perhaps this was just something that was 'sexy' at the time. She was *so* committed to it and she was actually doing a very good job.

Peta added, by way of evaluation of this project:

> The thing about this that really irritated me though was that the social worker and her manager were just *so* good at the *promotion* of this stuff. It was just a *really* small event but it got an immense amount of credit and appreciation.

Even though Audrey was many miles away, she also talked about the same project, this time in terms of the 'public valuing' of certain social work activities that could be promoted to a broader audience:

> We *all* heard about *that* project [laughs]. It's that *public* valuing thing – a recognition of something that's labour intensive for social workers. These stories then take on a life of their own and so, there might have been all sorts of problems associated with it, or it might have been a lot smaller in its impact or effects or whatever. But it's been *built-up*, because we *know* we have to build-up stories about these things, to meet the requirements. The Manager's got to tick the box to say they've done this - and say what it was, and what was achieved and what were the outcomes, and all this kind of thing. Then it becomes, 'you've *got* to write it up'! And so the story gets out there. I think eventually the people who get recognised for it actually *believe* the story [laughs]. But then again, everyone else is admonished [for not engaging in such activities]. It was *very clear* that if you do that sort of

thing, you're a *standout* sort of social worker and you've done this to get respect for the [social work] service. You've got a story that's *out there*, that's become *really* big and it can go in all the magazines and it gets respect for the social work service.

Audrey's final comment exemplifies a point made by Stephen Ball (2011), that performative expectations can create 'a local economy of self-valuing' in which people are seen, and may come to see themselves and each other, in terms of their contribution to the performance of the organisation. In this case, Audrey was left in no doubt about what was publicly valued by the organisation as 'standout' social work.

David made a similar point in expressing concerns about changing calculations of value in relation to the broader picture of social work practice:

It was a space where we felt we had to do something and that our work in Centrelink, working with clients and just meeting and networking with agencies, was not *enough* any more. We had to be doing something even above and beyond that. So there was a lot of pressure in fact to do a certain *type* of community work. There was no real analysis done on the impact on this on the other work we did.

Ruth, on the other hand, talked about a community partnership project that she was actively involved in that *didn't* make 'the magazines' – something she was pleased about for strategic reasons:

My most exciting time in Centrelink was when we started to talk about community partnerships. We set up a really good program that went for all the time I was there [in a particular office]. Now, I've got to say, if I'd *waited* to get permission to do that, I think I'd probably *still* be waiting. It's like everything needs to be *approved* whereas from my perspective, this was

our idea. As a community, we got together. *We* assessed that this was a real need, so let's *do* something! The programme was for young mothers from 14 to 21 and it was a programme where we had good educational and job results. We just put a flyer together and advertised it and it took off. We didn't know the flyer had to be approved by somebody sitting behind a desk somewhere – *too late*! It was up and it was running and it *was off*! So, it was a really positive time for me because I felt we were really doing some good work. The program itself is still running [in 2008] but as far as 'community partnerships' for Centrelink, it's the flavour of the month. It's gone!

Ruth wasn't counting on receiving organisational permission to participate in a project that she and her community colleagues thought would have positive outcomes for a group of young service users, despite assurances that the organisational culture was now actively encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship.

Peta provided an interesting account of a situation where she received public recognition for a social work activity that had actually become proscribed in a renegotiation of social work priorities in the context of Welfare to Work policy reforms:

I did get some recognition - a staff achievement award [laughs], for some work I did with [a particularly vulnerable group of service users]. I think it was good because within the social work group - like, I was criticised for putting so much effort into working with these clients. I don't think people realised just how much knowledge you had to develop in that area to be any good at it. I mean, I wasn't that *great* at it – I think I was pretty *average*, but I thought getting that award was good for the social work group - to make it think about the issues experienced by this group. The Business Manager Social Work found a way to recognise the effort and acknowledge the plight of these people even though the National Social Work targets no longer recognised them as priority groups. That's the thing that *really* irritated me,

and I don't know when this happened. Suddenly all those groups of people became 'non-priority groups' for social workers: migrants, refugees, people with disabilities and carers were no longer seen as a social work priority any more. That, I thought, was *very* wrong! The public acknowledgement I got for doing that sort of work could have been important but it didn't go anywhere.

Peta's narrative is interesting for this study for a number of reasons. Firstly, employee achievement award systems are generally predicated upon human resource management principles that seek to align individual identity with organisational identity in highly visible ways that Alvesson and Kärreman (2007, p. 719) refer to as 'communal aspects of identity projects [that] foster a sense of solidarity and loyalty to the [organisation] and to colleagues'. In this case, Peta was actually going against organisational 'value adding' regulation efforts in choosing to prioritise work with service user groups that were no longer seen as a priority within more tightly defined welfare reform parameters. Peta had hoped the award might have given her a degree of protection from organisational sanction, or even made social workers think more critically about their workplace priorities, but this apparently did not turn out to be the case. Peta also thought the award she received would be valuable for the social work group, but not in the way described by Stephen Ball as securing positive regard for the service. In the end, Peta was left to carry out social work activities she identified as valuable for a group of particularly vulnerable service users away from the gaze of social work colleagues and managers and often in her own time.

The comments by Audrey and Peta above reflect a perception that was shared by a number of the social work participants that it was necessary at this time to promote and even embellish stories of enterprising activities to demonstrate individual and collective social work value in order to ward off potential attrition of the social work service. Audrey went on to talk at length about the pressures on social workers to emphasise positive outcomes in their work when providing

management reports to the National Social Work Service about issues of practice
and policy:

> There was a time when we were only asked by National Social Work
> management for good news stories in our social work management reports.
> This is the other thing that used to get to us. I remember having discussions
> about this. 'Why can't we just tell stories about our practice'? And with case
> studies – 'why does it always have to be these positive, good outcomes'?
> What would that *be*? What are we expecting to see? They wanted us to write
> positive outcome stories and send them in and we used to think - what *are*
> they? We couldn't think up any!

Audrey went on to talk about a management approach that she interpreted as an
effort to engage the enthusiasm of senior social workers and administrative team
leaders towards championing activation policies and practices. She draws on
critical reflection skills to identify what she sees as simplistic assumptions
underpinning this organisational employee engagement strategy:

> They [Centrelink management] took us [team leaders and various senior
> social workers] to a hotel and spent a fortune, trying to get us all on board
> with this, and we heard all this stuff about the participation framework.
> They'd tell us these stories about [service users] who became very motivated
> after initially being so depressed they could barely leave the house. They
> [service users] had this great contact with the Job Network [31] and they
> worked with them on motivation and then they had one good experience of
> something that led them to - it's this inexorable process of progress and
> people throwing-off the shackles [laughs], economically participating and
> self-actualising. We heard all those stories. We didn't experience any of
> that stuff. I didn't really know anyone who'd had those experiences. I think

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[31] The title at the time of employment services contracted by the Australian Government to assess
job readiness and to provide assistance to find work for people. The incoming Rudd Labor
Government changed the title in early 2008 to *Job Services Australia*.

there was pressure to find good news stories but it was like, what do people interpret as a good news story?   What is a positive outcome? It's quite interesting.

Audrey identified a trend towards what she saw in some quarters as uncritical compliance with management requests to identify good news stories:

Social workers had to put these stories into quarterly performance reports and we'd see some of the [compiled] stuff. I don't think social workers were rewarded for sending in good news stories. I just think it was a response to an expectation. 'This is what we want so will you do it?'   That happens quite a bit. It just comes down the line that this is what we expect now, and social workers comply**.** Well not *everyone*. Some of us don't comply [laughs] or we might ask some questions about it and if we feel like we're not getting anywhere with a direct approach then we'll just *not* do something. We'll resist for a while and see what happens.

Audrey's account of social work compliance with responses to management expectations illustrates a suggestion made earlier in this thesis by Rogowski (2011) that social workers can become so caught up with getting a job done that they may stray from their professional commitments to think critically about the context in which they work. Another reading of this situation, as identified in Chapter Two of this thesis by Bill Jordan (2004) and others is that social workers are prone to being co-opted by aspirational discourses because of their long-held professional allegiance to principles of individualisation. In addition, individual social workers may simply experience a level of pride in the positive outcomes they do achieve through their interventions with service users in a practice environment that is often criticised by a broad range of commentators.

Stephen Ball (2000, p. 8/9) goes further than the descriptor 'embellishment' used by some of the social workers in this study, to describe what he refers to as efforts

to produce personal and institutional 'fabrications' in response to performative pressures. Ball argues that fabrication of performances is not done in a vacuum, but instead is influenced by prevailing policy and pressures to be accountable to certain organisational requirements:

> The fabrications that organisations (and individuals) produce are selections among various possible representations, or versions of the organisation or person… Clearly, particular groups or individuals will be able to privilege particular representations. However, these selections and choices are not made in a political vacuum. They are 'informed' by the priorities, constraints and climate set by the policy environment. In many instances these representations are simulacra. To paraphrase Foucault, fabrications are versions of an organisation (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 purposefully in order 'to be accountable'. Truthfulness is not the point - the point is their effectiveness, in the market…as well as the 'work' they do 'on' and 'in' the organisation - their transformational impact.

Such fabrications are 'paradoxical' in the sense that while they act to manage impressions of an individual/organisational performance, these acts of fabrication can become embedded in practice expectations, which then becomes something to be sustained and lived up to (Ball, 2000). In addition, such fabrications may then be reproduced by systems of recording and reporting on practice. Ball goes on to distinguish between 'trivial' forms of fabrication and 'constitutive fabrications' (Ball, 2000, p. 11). Trivial/representational fabrications could include the massaging of figures for inclusion in management reports, for example double-counting appointment numbers in the case of social workers in Centrelink. This might create a situation of distrust amongst social workers and a ratcheting-up of expectations about what is feasible within the limited resources available, resulting in a perception that it is necessary to follow suit in order to 'look good' and to remain competitive in the race for funding.

By the term 'constitutive fabrication', Ball (2000, p. 15) refers to the ways in which performativities are produced by the adoption of particular practices in relation to 'organising principles', or core assumptions. In the case of this study, core assumptions might be related to ideas about what constitutes effective social work practice in Centrelink. For example, in fabricating or embellishing 'good news stories', social workers may use the organisational criteria to set up an expectation that a simplistic intervention could change the course of a 'customer's' life, enabling her or him to, in Audrey's words, 'throw-off the shackles' and find meaning in life.

In complying with requests to identify and document 'good news stories' for distribution to a broader audience, social workers may become preoccupied with pressures to redefine what is valuable about their daily work, thereby contributing to a downgrading of previously valued roles and activities that fall outside political and organisational definitions of value. In this case, previously valued roles for social workers can be rendered invisible, including their role as individual, organisational and policy advocates, and their involvement in complex casework with service users that goes beyond participation requirements - work that is less likely to result in simplistic 'good news' outcomes.

Adding value through disaster recovery – a safety net for social work

Mary raised another example of an activity that was promoted for its public display of value for the collective Centrelink social work network:

> [Social Work] *definitely* had to do things to get on side with management. I don't know that we were that strategic. I think we went through a lot of grief and there was a lot of feeling of just being devalued. And then, we started to slowly shift to, 'what is it that we need to do to secure our position in this organisation?' To be heard, to be influential… *One* of the things I can think of is the emergency and disaster recovery work we got involved in. That was

huge! And we, as a social work service have *really* been given a lot of credit for it - by government, not just by Centrelink.

Mary is referring here to an activity that Centrelink was contracted by the Australian Government to perform that involved social workers and administrative staff providing financial, practical and emotional support to people affected by natural disasters (floods, droughts and bushfires) in Australia, and crisis incidents affecting Australians in other countries, such as the two Bali bombings and similar traumatic events. Centrelink social workers provided an ongoing liaison and support service to affected families and survivors in various capacities that involved the deployment of personnel, financial support and crisis management skills over sometimes extended periods of time (Manning, Millar, Newton, and Webb, 2007).

Mary, Peta and Audrey referred to the disaster recovery role for social workers as being highly valued. Audrey acknowledged the value of this high profile work to the reputation of the Centrelink social work service but she was concerned about the relative devaluing of other social work activities in relation to this high profile activity:

> Some of it was really the National Social Work service pushing us forward into that space because it was high profile. It was seen to be very valued. The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet really loved it and then they started asking for us. We created a demand, then Foreign Affairs would ask for social workers from Centrelink to go to all of those things. Then we were winched into – wherever, overseas places. And there were a lot of social workers who also felt like, 'yeah, it's very caring and compassionate and good to be there and, people are hurting and that's where we should be'. There's *lots* of public display of value! They come back and tell their story - if they've been to Cyprus or Turkey or Bali or Thailand, and they talked about their experience when they came back, and they're always on the

> social work meeting agendas. There's *lots* of recognition - and fair enough!
> I wouldn't want to do it and some of it has been *really* hard. And so, I don't
> mind them getting the recognition... It's perceived to have a lot of value, *in*
> *and of itself*, so if you've got a critique about the comparative value in a
> resource starved environment, then it's not really heard… And it's got value
> accorded to it *outside* of Centrelink. So because of that it's seen to be
> something we can rely on – that we can always say we do - that others rely
> on. If the PM, Cabinet and Foreign Affairs think it's really good, then that's
> *really good* [laughs]. Like a safety net for us to rely on!

Peta was also ambivalent about the inherent value of this publicly valued social
work activity:

> There was a lot of weight given to the Bali disaster welfare response. It
> really gets to me! You never really hear about the work we do on a day-to-
> day basis – that there's any value in the work that's of any value to our
> clients. Disaster recovery is publicly valued, because the social workers who
> get involved are seen to be 'flexible'.

Peta's comment demonstrates a concern that these highly visible and valued
organisational performative responses may lead to a redefinition of what is
considered valuable in social work practice. More mundane but no less important
social work interventions may be seen as less valuable when calculated against
imperatives to 'add value' to organisational performance, thereby devaluing
practices that enact broader social justice commitments.

Becoming visible as a valued social worker

The social work participants in this study talked about ways in which their daily
work was measured and compared through the use of electronic recording
systems. Centrelink took over a social work recording and reporting system called

the Social Work Information System (SWIS) that was originally designed in earlier days in DSS as a paper-based tool to document both casework and non-casework activities in each office (Dearman, 2005; Humphries and Camilleri, 2002). Social workers were required in DSS days to send paper-based monthly collations of data for each office to a project officer in the National Social Work Service where it was compiled and used by the Service to report on trends and issues of importance to social work practice across the network. Over time, the SWIS system, along with the social work appointment system, was digitalised and made visible to all social workers across the network. The SWIS system also became linked over time to the funding model for allocation of social work resources between sites. Claudia identified the performative aspects of the SWIS recording system and hinted at a level of embellishment of figures:

> The amount of data we have to input into the computer is mind-boggling. They introduced SWIS to replace the hand-writing of workload statistics and at the time it was just a statistical tool to give us a little bit of an idea of what we were doing, what we were working towards – that kind of thing. It's now become the funding model. So something that is so intangible –sometimes the outcome is going to be in one year, or two years or tomorrow - became the most tangible thing. But that's something about social work that I've noticed. There's a lot more emphasis now on outcome. You have to have outcomes! And a lot of research went into – 'how do we measure social work outcome'? And the outcomes were specified *for* us. And that was because of the managerial style of things that got introduced into social work and all human services. All over the world, it became like – 'we need outcomes'. But how do you measure outcomes? Slowly, slowly, SWIS became more of a resource model. So basically, the more you 'SWIS', the more you get, so that means that - I'm not so sure that a lot of social workers are 'SWISing' with integrity [laughs].

David presented a different and more positive appraisal of the value of transparent electronic recording and social work appointment systems:

> There's a lot more scrutiny of our work which is a bit like – we don't have as much latitude in some respects because it's more transparent, what we're doing and how we are doing it. It's easily monitored. We have appointments on the computer system so other people can see how many appointments are blocked, how many are kept open, how many appointments I'm doing compared to another CP2 [senior social worker] or how many my social work staff are doing. So it is a lot more transparent. But I think, because I'm so passionate about what I do, I think that I *like* that sort of transparency. I just feel that's good because then it keeps you on your toes and it stretches you. It's a good thing! SWIS is looked at now in terms of how much work you're doing in comparison with other offices and the *kind* of work we're doing. So it's again another part of scrutiny, linked to resources. We get statistics from all offices once or twice a month so my team are all very interested to see how we're doing compared to the other offices.

The accounts by Claudia and David suggest that social workers in dispersed sites are very aware of the comparisons that are made between teams, particularly as they relate to quantitative data. David believes the visibility of data 'stretches' social workers in terms of 'how much' work is being done. David's statement about the interest shown by the social work team in seeing how they were doing compared to other offices also vivifies Stephen Ball's account of the social and interpersonal dimensions of performative responses.

'You will all do it this way' - Centrelink goes 'back to the future[32]'

> One minute Sue Vardon was there, and all of a sudden she wasn't. One
> minute we had personal advisers[33] then, suddenly they were gone. There was
> never any sort of explanation about what was happening. I'm not sure the
> reason for *any* of that was conveyed to staff. The National Social Work
> Service didn't convey what was happening at the time.

This is the way Steve represented the sudden departure of Sue Vardon as CEO of
Centrelink in December 2004. The announcement to staff came through a short
internal email that simply said Sue Vardon wanted to spend more time with her
family in South Australia. Peter Humphries, Deputy Director Social Work
accounted for this sudden move in the following speculation:

> I think in the end she went because Centrelink stopped being a stand-alone
> agency. It became *part* of the Department of Human Services, which meant
> that she was responsible to a Secretary, not a Minister. She wasn't going to
> be doing *that* [laughs]! And I think it was - the time had come. The
> Government was moving into their Welfare to Work reform agenda. I think
> she did her very best to mitigate some of the impacts of that, as much as she
> could from her position. In the end, she *couldn't* because of the policy. And
> I'm sure, although I don't know for sure - it was my sense that in the end the
> Government came to see her as not sympathetic.

Taking a step back to the period immediately before Sue Vardon's departure,
Gloria explained the policy and practice environment before and after the return to

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[32] The term 'Back to the future' is borrowed from Halligan and Wills (2008)
[33] Centrelink Personal Advisers were employed under the 2001 Australians Working Together
policy framework to provide extra help to assist mature age workers, parents with school age
children, Indigenous Australians and people with special needs to get a job or to participate as
fully as possible in their community.

a more traditional form of public service agency. Gloria had been offered a temporary secondment away from the regular social work role to take on a project coordination role in establishing and supporting the new 'personal adviser' position, as part of the move towards encouraging social and economic participation for service users:

> I was asked to take on an 'Australians Working Together' Project Coordinator position at that time. I was *really* gratified that I would be a good person to do that. I'd done quite a few community things and I thought, 'I'm quite well placed now to be able to do that and to influence the way this new approach happened'. I think that's a real motivator for me - being able to be influential. When the personal advisers started, that was very exciting – it was wonderful! I *love* all that stuff. They were trained in motivational interviewing techniques and they were very client focused and they were given plenty of time, like an hour, to talk to customers about their goals and what they wanted to do and what their barriers were. It started off, there were these pathways - there was social participation and economic participation and then things shifted and they got rid of 'social participation' – it was all 'economic participation' after that. But they were very exciting days.

Gloria went on to talk about the way things shifted following the resignation of Sue Vardon and the disbanding of the Centrelink Board of Management:

> It was really the client department [Department of Employment and Workplace Relations, DEWR]. The focus was on jobs. They were so hard-line! *Absolutely* hard-line about it! Things shifted. When FACS [the Department of Family and Community Services] owned some of the policies and some of the payments, they were more into *social* participation but then there was a Budget and all that work was given over to DEWR, and social participation just went out the window. I think it was probably about the

same time Sue Vardon left. I think she probably went as part of a purge. It was all part of a reform of the Public Service I think.

Mary described the change of governance arrangements in the following way:

It was almost like going back into a public service environment. We'd moved away from that since Centrelink was created into a very customer service focused organisation that had this corporatised language all around it, back into a public service mode. We were told it would go back to basics, it would go back to, 'what is it that we're here to do? – and, that is to deliver government services'. We were to go back into a very consistent, uniform sort of service delivery arrangement. 'You will all do it *this* way'!

Plato talked about what it meant to move the focus from 'social participation' to 'economic participation':

When it was first sold to Centrelink, you could have 'social participation' as a pathway to 'economic participation'. And it's not just if you've got a job - you're better off than if you don't, it's the fact that if you've got a stable house, and you've got some counselling to help you get past your relationship breakdown and you're working with your kids. And you might do some training and all the rest of it - that's the gateway, that's the pathway. And it came from that to say, 'well, no – employment in and of itself was the fundamental vehicle for participation and anything short of that was really inferior'. But, by choosing to be a public servant – this is one of the really interesting tensions – being a public servant, you're supposed to be apolitical and impartial. Yet, you've got a government which is clearly political and has certain emphases and has certain objectives in mind, that aren't about impartiality either. Having to reconcile that somehow.

Steve told a story from experience that illustrates the social and interpersonal dimension of performativity as it relates to communal regulatory processes, that

also says something about the pressures on social workers to adhere to policies predicated on 'work first' principles:

> The worst thing – the representation in my mind was a social work meeting that we all went to. We had an ex-social worker who was now working in the management side of things of the Welfare to Work program and they were trying to sell this program to social workers. We ran this exercise where we had to stand in a continuum about where we thought we stood on the question of: 'getting a job is the best form of welfare'. And we were made to stand in a [line] – so you were *really* identifying yourself on this situation. It was almost like - 'if you stand anywhere but at this end of the continuum, what's wrong with you?' You're identified as this person who was a troublemaker. I stood at the opposite end and when it came down to – 'why are you standing there'? – I said, 'just to be different'. Because, there's always a different side of things - there's not an absolute! Even though the policy might say, this is a good thing, and I can't argue with that – if you get a job, it probably *is* the best form of welfare, but not *necessarily* for everybody, in *every* particular case. And I'm standing there essentially to make a stand against - on *principle*. We as social workers should not just be loaded up one end of the room [laughs].

All of the social work participants had stories to tell about the challenges they faced in the implementation of 'work first' inspired welfare reform policies. Of particular concern was their increasing involvement in 'compliance' related activities such as 'breaching' and 'financial case management'. In Ruth's words:

> You know, it was *really, really* hard. I had financial case management customers. It's just *so* demeaning when you've got to have a customer right in front of you with all her or his bills and accounts and we've got to sit down and say – 'we've got to pay your rent, pay for your medication – now what else do you need? Now, you don't have that sort of money so let's see where we can spend this money'. You *don't* need to do that with an adult,

for God's sake. This eight-week non-payment period is not doing anyone any good and I've seen what it's done to customers.

Skye provided an example of the situations the social workers were dealing with on a daily basis:

I had one case where a man basically went into the eight-week non-payment period with $1,000 worth of debt and came out with $3,000 worth of debt. He used welfare agencies to survive during those eight weeks and he had to re-negotiate his rent and he borrowed money from every source he could. He survived – yes! But what changed for him? He just ended up depressed because the barrier that he *thought* he had – he had $1,000 to be out of debt and now it's $3,000, it's like, two steps back.

Audrey talked about the administrative pressure that came to be placed on social workers in their delegated role of assessing service user entitlement to temporary exemptions from looking for work in exceptional circumstances, or in assessing the complexity of situations that resulted in a non-payment 'breach':

If you had compassionate people in the Job Network - and there *are* some [laughs] - they were still obliged by the system to send the reports through to Centrelink, and then that report had to be investigated and checked-out. 'Did the person have a reasonable excuse? And so applying that 'failure' as they called it - It's just the language – it's *amazing* isn't it? It's really interesting how people use that language to service users, and say things like, 'you've got this failure' (laughs). So the apply rate of these failure reports was *the* big thing and DEWR was keen to make sure that lots of people weren't just granted exemptions. Because they saw that if people were granted exemptions because they had ongoing issues - they had various names for it but it was like 'passive space', 'non-active space' - that the person would be interminably churning around in this kind of exemption category. Nobody is '*intervening*!' and so they wanted a lot of

'intervention' on the person. If you granted an exemption - it was kind of like the slogans that are still out there [in 2008] like, 'minimise exemptions, maximise participation', and 'maximise connection to the Job Network'.

Audrey went on to talk about what she saw as a strategy by social work management to persuade the social workers of the importance of their role in this increasingly stringent welfare reform environment:

Well, [the National Social Work Service] sent carefully worded messages. And very much, when things come through in the email system, its very carefully worded and correct, like: 'this initiative has got these things in mind, and this is *such* an important role for the social work service, we are *really* valued in this process, our skills and knowledge in this area could be put to such good use' - all that sort of thing. So they talk to us in ways that are fairly paternalistic in some ways I think.

Peta explained a strategy she and some other social workers felt compelled to adopt in order to ameliorate the harshest implications of some of these welfare reform measures:

What we had to do was to get really good at knowing the policy. There was a lot of procedural stuff in the participation decisions that you needed to be aware of and it took a little bit of time for me to get up to scratch with that. It was quite different from what was there previously. You were *really* struggling to find a way out for people and you had to classify them as having these 'vulnerability' risks. I couldn't swallow that stuff! What I ended up doing was exploiting the activity test by really giving them a way out. On a couple of occasions, I really made good use of that in ways I wouldn't have done in other circumstances. I had to do it because people would have ended up without payments for eight weeks.

Peta explained that social workers were not given the power to make decisions about over-turning decisions to impose severe penalties on service users so they had to go through what she perceived to be deliberately convoluted administrative channels in order to advocate for service users facing eight-week non-payment periods. Peta argued that these processes were put in place in order to limit the discretion available to frontline staff to give services users the benefit of the doubt, as a strategy to meet increasingly harsh compliance targets.

Peter Humphries explained that the National Social Work Service was aware of increasing distress amongst social workers due to the nature of the policy reforms they were required to implement and the limited capacity available to them to apply their skills of individual and systemic advocacy:

> There's a really good example of that where a group of social workers from Centrelink wrote to the AASW saying how unethical it was they were being asked to do this work. But once you got to talk to them about it, I'd say, 'the question is how you do it *ethically* rather than whether the work *is* ethical. I mean we're not asking you to commit mass murder [laughs]'. This [social work activity] is actually helping people who otherwise wouldn't have anything, to get something. So, the ethics of it are, I think – 'you may not agree with the policy, but…'

Steve saw the regulatory environment as promoting compliance and putting a lid on social work critique:

> It really was a case of – that message was put out very clearly – that you weren't to be critical. It was stated in a number of organisational briefings and things like that. The message was, 'if you're not happy working here, there are other places to work'. That really became an underlying philosophy within the organisation. 'Don't be critical of the organisation.' That was the message that was basically put out there – that's my memory. 'You are here

to do the business of the government of the day'. I think that's what affected social work severely, because we just became – from a section in an organisation that was valued for its ability to be critical, to be able to get to the point of where the problem was with a policy or certain issue – it went to the stage of where we were just fed this stuff. 'You deal with it - you're not allowed to criticise it. If you criticise it, you're not going to go anywhere. It was *really* awful!'

Chapter Review

This chapter explored government and organisational regulatory processes through the lens of performative aspects of social work identity. Stephen Ball's articulation of performativity was applied to empirical material in order to identify changing operational efforts to apply technologies of measurement, comparison and evaluation of social work performances. Again, the social work narratives demonstrate a diversity of reactions to various elements of change. It was clear from the participants' own accounts that they were not easily seduced by organisational efforts to encourage a blanket acceptance of service delivery and policy changes. It was also clear from the social workers' narratives that they faced new practice and ethical challenges as welfare policy principles transitioned from the [in retrospect] 'softer' version of the *Australians Working Together* platform to the more stringent *Welfare to Work* platform and 'work first' principles. There was evidence over time of a shift from the more personal, individual and social features of workplace regulation that characterised the so-called 'Vardon era' towards an instrumental form of control based on impersonal, behavioural and bureaucratic mechanisms of regulation of public servant performances as the organisation moved back to the resurrected traditional public service organisational form.

The next and final chapter of this thesis will bring together some of the key findings of this analysis of empirical material in order to make some statements

about new understandings of processes of Centrelink social work engagement with the reforming state during a period of significant organisational and policy transformation.

CONCLUSION

Introduction

This thesis set out to understand the operation of processes of organisational regulation that many public sector workers experience but often don't have the time and energy to reflect upon in the daily busyness of workplaces permeated by NPM cultures and practices. This situation has become endemic within the Australian public sector as workers are enjoined to become increasingly productive, with fewer publicly provided resources available to them to perform their workplace and professional roles to their own personal and professional satisfaction. It is common for public sector workers to express their frustration with organisational and policy regulations that impede their workplace achievements while at the same time facing requirements to provide accounts of their performance in managerial value laden terms. This is the context in which this thesis is set and the context in which Centrelink social workers engage on a daily basis with practice and policy challenges within a rapidly changing public service practice and policy environment.

Re-statement of the questions that guided this research

The broad focus of interest in this thesis is the way social workers understand and respond to their changing organisational and policy context. The specific context in which this focus is explored is a ten year period of intensive NPM and welfare policy reform that created new expectations of social workers within the Australian Government income support agency *Centrelink*. The rapid adoption by Centrelink of a raft of private sector management processes thrust the social work service into a new organisational landscape that required them to adopt an enterprising stance towards the administration of increasingly stringent and punitive welfare policy reforms. This reform context confronted social workers

with the daily challenge of maintaining a viable social work service within Centrelink while at the same time reflecting on their feet about how to maintain codified professional values in the face of rapidly evolving organisational and welfare policy challenges.

The empirical study informing this thesis explored at some level of depth the nuanced reflection processes and practice responses of individual social workers in this challenging and rapidly changing context of practice. The analysis of empirical material was attuned to *processual* approaches to change, particularly the way change was represented by various government and organisational agents, then understood and responded to by the social work participants in this study. Specifically, the analysis was focused on social work participant accounts of their responses to expectations to demonstrate their value to Centrelink within a policy and practice environment that became increasingly hostile to collective social work professional commitments. The specific questions that informed and guided the design and analysis of this research are restated here:

- How did Centrelink define and promote its organisational identity and performative expectations to client departments, employees, service users and the general public?
- What operational strategies did Centrelink use to regulate the performance of its public service employees?
- What discourses gave meaning to changing expectations of social workers in Centrelink during the period under investigation?
- What criteria did Centrelink social workers perceive the organisation used to judge their worth and value at different times during the period 1997 to the close of 2007?
- How did social workers respond to and reshape dominant discourses and constructions of their identities within Centrelink during this period?

- How did individual social workers assess their *own* personal and professional value within this context of organisational and policy change?

Overview of the thesis

This thesis provided an account of co-evolving federal public service organisational design reforms and welfare policy reforms predicated on the operation of principles adopted by a new government intent on reforming, and being *seen* to reform, the state welfare apparatus in Australia. It was argued that public service management reforms drew explicitly upon private sector managerial technologies such as privatisation, accounting, marketisation, corporatisation, outsourcing and normative principles of enterprise in order to engage and discipline public servants to become more responsive to government agendas within an environment of public service contestability. In the case of Centrelink, public servants, including social workers, were enjoined to adopt an enterprising stance towards the administration of welfare policy reforms designed to enact new forms of conditionality, based on discourses of individualisation, aspiration, customisation and activation. This account provided the context for an exploration of empirical material in later chapters that focused on the detail of organisational change processes and importantly, on understandings of and responses to these reforms by social work participants.

The study sought to extend current understandings of the *effects* of NPM and welfare policy reforms on social workers through exploring the ways in which these interrelated reforms sought to change the people experiencing the changes. The government activation agenda had to be managed, administered and achieved by public servants within a contestable environment, so decisions needed to be made by senior management about the most productive organisational approaches to achieving welfare reform objectives. Centrelink was established as an experiment in new public service management design with an explicit agenda to

appropriate corporate strategies in order to engage the commitment and productivity of its public service workforce in the administration of increasingly stringent welfare reform measures. In broad terms, the thesis argued that this involved efforts to move away from a bureaucratic, discipline-focused approach to regulating required performances, towards processes of *normative* regulation of employees that focused on securing their motivation and commitment towards achieving required organisational objectives. The thesis identified two related approaches to engaging the commitment of the social work service in Centrelink, both focused on the regulation of professional workplace practices. Firstly, efforts were directed towards regulating the individual, organisational and occupational *identities* of social workers. Secondly, efforts were put in place to regulate the professional *performances* of social workers within a specific performative regime that introduced a new calculus of managerially inscribed values into organisational performance assessment criteria.

Summary of findings from the empirical study

A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted of material obtained from a corpus of organisational texts and from transcripts of interviews with ten 'veteran' Centrelink social workers to explore organisational processes directed towards engaging the commitment of social workers in achieving the stated objectives of a reforming government. The analysis began by exploring narratives of change that focused on the social work participants' accounts of their experience of working for the precursor public service income support department, DSS. This detail was included as a starting point for exploring the transition from one organisational form to another. It was proposed that individual participant narratives provided clues to the value stance and individual and professional commitments each person brought to social work practice in a public service setting that was often criticised in the public domain as being overly bureaucratic and punitive in its administration of income support payments.

Overall, the social work participants described a commitment to publicly provided welfare services based on notions of social citizenship and public entitlement that seem almost archaic in comparison to the principles that went on to animate the trajectory of welfare reform in later years. Social work participants expressed ambivalence about the culture of service provision that had grown up in DSS but generally saw the opportunities available to them to exercise discretion creatively and to maintain a level of autonomy in performing policy and practice within this traditional public service context. The social work participants talked about a perception of being on the periphery within DSS in their individual and systemic advocacy roles within a secondary welfare setting. However, they were able to identify a range of skills they developed in order to meet personal and professional commitments while continuing to develop strategic relationships with management and administrative colleagues. It was clear from the accounts provided that social workers enjoyed a relatively strong level of autonomy in the design and performance of their various professional roles within DSS offices and in their local communities, at least in comparison with later periods of time.

The study moved forward to focus on the journey from a traditional public service department model to the newly corporatised public service agency environment of Centrelink. While acknowledging some tangible organisational reforms that improved the quality of service delivery to service users, the social workers provided nuanced and diverse accounts of their understandings of, and approaches to, engaging with practice and policy challenges. The participants demonstrated a capacity for critical reflection on efforts that sought to get them 'on board' with blanket commitments to organisational objectives. However, there was evidence of differences *between* social workers as well as *within* individual social workers in the ways in which they negotiated workplace opportunities and challenges. It was argued that these accounts appeared to be centred on both stable and shifting individual subjectivities over time, as well as changes in social work identities brought about by organisational and policy reforms.

Some of the research participants embraced opportunities to take an enthusiastic and entrepreneurial approach to engaging with organisational performance objectives including: leadership of cultural change management activities; conducting training and mentoring of administrative staff to support the achievement of humane interactions with service users; participation in partnerships with local service providers to achieve government welfare reform priorities, such as the achievement of social and economic participation targets; and involvement in broader programme and project management roles.

Participants such as 'David', 'Gloria', 'Mary' and 'Plato' spoke about their decision to take up opportunities available to them because they believed these new roles provided opportunities to influence the quality of service delivery, community networking activities, social policy initiatives and the achievement of social work specific and broader office performance criteria. This was often couched in terms of seeing a level of consistency between organisational reforms and social work values and commitments. There was diversity amongst this group of participants in the way they appraised their success in influencing the direction of change but they all remained focused on active engagement with the change agenda, even when they faced disappointments such as having positively evaluated programs cancelled from under them as government or organisational priorities changed.

There was evidence of diversity amongst the social work participants in their approach to critical analysis of organisational and welfare reform initiatives. Social workers such as 'Audrey', 'Claudia', 'Peta', 'Ruth' and to some extent 'Steve', were openly critical of social work management and broader agency management efforts to engage their enthusiasm for welfare reforms they perceived to be inconsistent with personal and professional commitments. Even within this group there was diversity about matters of strategy when responding to social work management requests to demonstrate their commitment to specific publicly

valued activities, such as high profile disaster recovery activities and the request to couch their social work management reports in terms of 'good news stories' focused on performance indicators they did not necessarily value. It was clear from the narratives of these participants that they were critical of the direction of organisational and policy reforms and at times, critical of social work colleagues who chose to actively embrace changes. However, their accounts provided evidence of *active engagement* with the reform process and sustained efforts to influence the change agenda within their local sites of practice and within the broader organisation. Their accounts of organisational resistance at an individual and collaborative level provided evidence of active processes of engagement based on strongly held personal, professional and organisational values and commitments.

It was clear from the rich narratives provided by all of the social work participants that there was some consistency throughout the accounts of each participant that reflected a level of stability within elements of personal history, identifications, political and social alliances and motivations for choosing to work as a social worker over a long period of time within a public service setting. There was also evidence throughout the narratives of what Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1168) refer to as 'identity work' – a term employed to emphasise ongoing struggles in creating a sense of self and what this 'self' stands for. In the case of this study, identity work was evident in participant accounts of individual and collaborative patterns of decision making in relation to issues such as: the strategic use of corporate language and symbolism; decisions about whether and how to engage with management and administrative colleagues to achieve key performance indicators; the level of active involvement in highly promoted activities such as social enterprise and disaster recovery work that was heralded as promoting value for the social work service within the organisation in a contestable environment; the level of commitment to individual and/or collaborative social work critique and challenging of organisational goals and

practices, and involvement in other material and symbolic processes that supported management strategies to secure competitive advantage within a contestable practice environment.

The thesis went on to explore social work participant engagement with organisational and policy reforms from another perspective, through drawing upon the theoretical lens of 'performativity' to shed light on efforts to regulate professional performances in a corporatised public service workplace. It was argued that there was a shift in balance in the latter part of the life of Centrelink as the welfare reform policy climate changed with the re-election of a conservative government committed to taking advantage of what they heralded as an electoral mandate to ratchet-up the activation agenda. A significant change in organisational governance arrangements saw a shift in the nature and direction of regulatory efforts to discipline both public servants and service users in order to achieve increasingly stringent welfare reform objectives. Organisational processes were tightened through the use of administrative technologies and information technology systems in ways that limited administrative policy discretion and social work autonomy. This period in the development of public management and welfare policy reform saw a shift over time from the more personal, relational and social features of workplace regulation that characterised the 'Vardon Era', towards more instrumental forms of organisational regulation based on impersonal, behavioural and bureaucratic technologies of regulation. Again, the social workers demonstrated a variety of responses to these changing workplace challenges that went beyond passive compliance to reflect active but diverse processes of engagement and negotiation at the micro-level of practice.

All of the participants in this study struggled in the latter part of the period under investigation to remain positive in the face of increasingly punitive activation policies and practices. A number of the social workers were forced to take on 'income management' administration roles that required them to assess and

support service users who faced punitive non-payment penalties for perceived breaches of stringent activation requirements. Each of the participants talked about strategies they used in an effort to protect particularly vulnerable service users – sometimes taking personal risks in their advocacy role in order to do so – to circumvent performance management, administrative and computer technology systems set up to limit the discretion of Centrelink employees.

The participants in this study talked about efforts to resist organisational practices they assessed to be inconsistent with personal and professional commitments, either at the individual or collective level. Social work participants such as 'Steve', 'Claudia', 'Audrey', 'Gloria' and 'Peta' spoke about the advantages of having worked in the organisation over a long period of time and the increased confidence and influence their 'veteran' status brought to their efforts to resist or forestall specific punitive policy reform activity. Most of the participants questioned their own commitment to remaining in the organisation at some point during the latter part of the period under investigation but all of them decided to stay, albeit in a different organisational capacity in some cases.

All of the social workers provided accounts of various elements of organisational practice that sustained them throughout the challenges they faced during a period of intensive reform. Most of these sustaining factors related to relationships with like-minded social workers, and/or community and administrative colleagues within the organisation. All of the participants remained committed to public service social work and all of them were able to identify specific areas of work that accorded with their personal and professional interests and commitments. All of the participants were cautiously optimistic at the time of the research interviews - in the early months of the year 2008 - about a possible change in the direction of organisational and policy reform with the recent election of a Labor Government.

Theorising engagement with the reforming state

This thesis contributes to the theorising of social work engagement with NPM and welfare policy reforms through shedding light on workplace processes that seek to capture the responsiveness of social workers towards the achievement of contested organisational and policy outcomes. The study for this thesis found that neo-liberal inspired organisational processes in play within Centrelink during the period under investigation sought to regulate social work practices in two important and related ways: through efforts to regulate the *identity* of social workers towards becoming organisational subjects committed to organisational design changes, and through efforts to regulate social work *performances* via a range of performative technologies aimed at limiting public servant autonomy and discretion in order to achieve increasingly punitive welfare reform objectives.

Examples of these regulatory efforts within this study included efforts to engage the commitment of social workers to support organisational cultural change activities that drew on long-standing social work values, stretching back to the earliest days of the precursor agency DSS to 'make the administration as humane as possible'. A number of the social workers in this study talked about their commitment to activities that influenced the direction of Centrelink service delivery towards more dignified interactions with service users. Similarly, some of the participants talked about their passion for working with specific groups of service users towards an improved quality of life, drawing upon discourses of individualisation identified by Bill Jordan and others in earlier chapters of this thesis. All of the social workers in this study were able to identify values and commitments that sustained them in their daily work in such a challenging public service setting. The fact that all of the social work participants had remained in the organisation for so long suggests that they saw opportunities to influence and shape the context of their practice in ways that accorded with personal, organisational and occupational values.

It was proposed in this study that there is value for social workers in attending to managerial practices such as impression management, that seek to engage the identifications of employees and other stakeholders in the interests of promoting the achievement of organisational objectives. From a management perspective, strategies that target the identities, values and commitments of employees are likely to be more effective when implementing contested policy reforms than those that seek to control workers through more instrumental disciplinary processes.

As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the challenge for management in securing the commitment of professionals is to make visible, measure and engage professionals themselves in efforts to evaluate their own performance according to the values identified by that professional group. The challenge for social workers as public servants is to hold in balance codified professional values, social justice commitments, critical analysis and ethical practice with organisational expectations about their role in achieving politically and managerially inspired public service obligations. Social workers require skills and a level of critical awareness about, and literacy in, analysing organisational processes in order to remain vigilant about these commitments within rapidly evolving NPM contexts.

It was argued in Chapter Six of this thesis that Stephen Ball's articulation and analysis of 'performativity' provides a powerful conceptual tool for analysing processes of organisational change and, in the case of this thesis, social work engagement with organisational and policy reform. Performative technologies seek to influence and evaluate organisations and individual workers through employing judgements, comparisons and displays as means of control, attrition and change in relation to work performances (Ball, 2000). Evaluative standards are often constructed from outside the work unit and reflect political and competitive values.

According to Stephen Ball, the performances of individual subjects or organisations serve as measures of productivity or quality, and can be used to represent the worth, quality or value of an individual or organisation within a particular field (Ball, 2003). Ball's perspective incorporates a focus on evaluations from what he refers to as the 'outside-in' that draw on *externally* prescribed performance indicators. In the context of Centrelink, this includes performance measures such as organisational timeliness standards, random and planned audits of administrative decision making accuracy, achievements in relation to published organisational key performance indicators, criteria expressed in employment selection documents and promotion processes, and prescribed shared behaviour statements.

There is a significant existing body of literature that explores the impact of externally developed performance assessment criteria on the performance of employees across a broad range of organisational contexts. In general terms, this system of evaluation creates pressures on individual employees to construct and perform versions of themselves within a competitive environment that accord with documented organisational expectations. There is less focus within existing literature - particularly within the field of social work - on the way performative regimes act upon the 'insides' of employees, or what Ball refers to as the 'emotional status dimension' of performative regimes (Ball, 2003, p.221). This perspective focuses on the social and interpersonal dimensions of workplace practices and goes beyond existing accounts that focus on the disciplinary effects of conventional performance management processes.

An analysis of empirical material for this study made it possible to demonstrate the operation within Centrelink of performative processes that act upon 'the insides' to secure social workers' active engagement with organisational performative priorities. Drawing upon Ball's description of performative criteria (Ball, 2003, p. 221), it is proposed that social workers in this study sometimes chose to engage in active ways with organisational performative criteria such as:

- *Measurement of productivity:* by demonstrating achievement through reporting to the National Social Work service on an individual's or team's capacity to meet quantitative and qualitative performance outcomes measured against Centrelink and National Social Work key performance indicators. An example in this study was 'David's' commitment to the transparent regime of compiling performance statistics and appointment numbers;

- *A means of demonstrating responsiveness to change*: demonstrated by social workers in this study who responded to invitations to assist in cultural change activities focused on the quality of interactions with service users. For example, 'Gloria' talked about her pride in being chosen to manage the implementation of the new 'personal adviser' program;

- *A display of quality:* involves providing artefacts of performance that are actively offered-up by individual social workers or teams of social workers for evaluation by the organisation, such as involvement in 'value adding' participation-focused activities described by 'Gloria' in this study;

- *A means of achieving required productivity*: relates to the capacity of Centrelink to identify and return productivity dividends to funding departments within a context of public service accountability and contestability. An example of this includes social workers engaging with National Social Work business improvement processes aimed at achieving productivity gains, as discussed by 'Plato' in this study;

- *A moment of performance or promotion:* by an individual social worker or team, or the broader National Social Work service such as a presentation or magazine article by social workers returning from disaster recovery activities in order to demonstrate the positive value this brings to the individual social worker, the National social work service or the organisation;

- *A target of inspection:* an artefact of work that can be observed, recorded, measured and manipulated in a process of assessment – in the case of this study, the 'good news stories' that were promoted widely by individual social workers or social work management. These 'stories' are reported by 'Peta', 'Claudia' and 'Audrey' in this study as having been embellished or even fabricated to serve their performative intention;

- *Something the organization or an individual social worker provides for positive evaluation and reward,* suggesting an element of choice by social workers about what constitutes high value activity. An example in this study was the account of one social worker's commitment to enterprising activities such as the highly promoted social enterprise activity discussed in this study involving migrant women.

The contribution of this thesis

This exploratory study contributes to ongoing scholarship focused on social work responses to neoliberal inspired organisational and welfare policy reforms, particularly as this relates to social work practice in a public service context. This topic was explored out of a sense of frustration with existing scholarship that represents social workers more narrowly as passive and compliant participants in change processes occurring beyond their control.

It is important not to underestimate the challenges faced by social workers arising out of the political and economic reform processes documented in this thesis but it is clear to anyone who engages in organisational practice that there is often a wide diversity of responses to change. This diversity is observed between organisational actors as well as within individuals but there has been limited attention devoted within social work scholarship to focusing down on organisational processes that influence social work responses at the micro-practice

level. This thesis has drawn attention to particular areas of scholarship within the fields of critical management and organisational studies and educational sociology that provide useful theoretical frameworks for apprehending processes of social work engagement within regulated organisational life.

The specific focus of this research is the *processual* nature of social work engagement with a matrix of public service organisational and welfare policy changes in Australia throughout a period of intensive politically motivated reform activity. The impetus for this focus on *processes of engagement* arose out of a review of existing social work scholarship that provides important but limited insights into the completed *effects* of NPM reform on social work practice within state welfare institutions. The empirical study that informed this thesis was designed to move beyond existing understandings of the way social workers perceived the *outcomes* of such reforms on their daily practice. Existing accounts of the effects of changes informed by neo-liberal principles paint a mostly pessimistic picture of a social work profession struggling to negotiate a gap between collective social work ideals and the regulations and related limitations imposed upon individual social workers engaged in public sector organisational life. This body of scholarship has conceptualised social workers as mostly passive and resigned recipients of the discourses of change, leading to widespread feelings of alienation, frustration and powerlessness, resulting in either active or passive compliance with contested organisational practices, or withdrawal from regulated public social services.

The conclusion reached by this thesis is that the social workers in the case study organisation Centrelink demonstrated active processes of reflection and engagement that drew upon various elements of 'self-identity' (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002, p. 623). At the same time, it can be seen from social work participant accounts that their engagement with the reforming state also led to changes in individual and/or collective social work identities, through active and reflexive identity work.

Implications of this research for education, policy and practice:

This thesis has demonstrated that social workers in Centrelink were involved throughout the ten year period under investigation in active processes of engagement with a range of organisational discourses and practices in their daily negotiation of the micropolitics of their regulated workplaces. The key contribution made by this thesis is the development and application of a more nuanced approach to analysing social work organisational practice than is currently available, drawing upon conceptual tools developed across a range of disciplinary areas that challenge the existing view of social workers as passive participants in state reform initiatives.

The findings of this thesis have implications for social work education and the performance of social policy and social work practice across all human service sites. The findings provide additional support for Jan Fook's argument that social workers with a commitment to individual and social justice need to be mindful of framing their practice in terms of engagement with contextual environments, rather than seeing organisational context as something external, fixed and beyond their influence (Fook, 2002). Social work practice within any human service setting entails potential conflicts between core values and workplace regulations. This situation requires individual social workers to hold in balance personal values, aims, identifications and motivations, while at the same time being held accountable and assessed against codified professional commitments, organisational mandates, workplace rules and performance guidelines. Social work can be an ambiguous project within public sector organisations as professional values come up against rapidly changing and politically driven policy agendas and organisational practices. Social workers are challenged to maintain a critical vigilance over their organisational practice environment in order to create and be responsive to opportunities to actively engage in possibilities for change at the organisational and policy level.

This thesis highlights the importance of developing and implementing programmes of education for social workers at both an undergraduate and a continuing education level, focused at the development of a critical literacy and skills in organisational analysis and related practice. Education programmes that develop knowledge and skills in this area would go some way towards addressing the perceived passivity and pessimism of social workers in response to organisational and policy reform while providing practice-centred skills in understanding and responding to material and discursive changes.

The organisational context of social work practice is often busy, complex and challenging. The crisis focus of so much social work practice can leave limited time and space for standing back from organisational practice to reflect upon the various layers of competing values and commitments. In the words of 'Audrey', one of the participants in this study, material and symbolic reforms can sometimes simply *'seep into you'* in the context of daily busyness, even for the most critically aware social workers. This study found that social work participants continued to enact codified professional values and commitments, even in the face of punitive policies and organisational processes but they often did so in a quiet and strategic way that shielded them from the gaze of organisational regulations. This not only places individual social workers at risk of censure, but also limits their opportunity to share effective strategies and understandings with social work colleagues. The achievement of codified collective social work commitments requires open but strategic questioning of aspects of workplace context and practice. The first step in doing so involves social workers developing an intelligent understanding of the complex organisations in which they work and a reflexive capacity to open up their practice to self-scrutiny and the scrutiny of social work colleagues within and without the sites in which they work. Insights such as those identified within this thesis can equip social workers with the analytical tools they need to reflect upon and resist organisational and policy injustices they will continue to confront in their ongoing engagement with the reforming state.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: List of principles established by the Howard Coalition government to inform welfare reform

In November 1999, the then Minister for Family and Community Services, Jocelyn Newman announced the government's intention to conduct a major welfare review (Newman, 1999). In announcing the review, the government proposed a set of welfare principles it wished to take into a future reform agenda including:

- maintaining equity, simplicity, transparency and sustainability;
- establishing better incentives for people receiving social security payments so that work, education and training are rewarded;
- creating greater opportunities for people to increase self-reliance and capacity building, rather than merely providing a passive safety net;
- an expectation that people on income support to help themselves and contribute to society through increased social and economic participation in a framework of mutual obligation;
- providing choices and support for individuals and families with more tailored assistance that focuses on prevention and early intervention;
- maintaining the government's disciplined approach to fiscal policy (Newman, 1999).

In launching the review, the Minister commented on specific issues and problems of concern to the government that required attention in the review, including the Government's view that:

- some parts of the welfare system create work and saving disincentives;
- more can be done to emphasise individual responsibility;
- the system does too little to prevent the problems resulting in people needing to go on payments;
- more needed to be done to help people improve their capacity to move off payments;
- the number of children in workless families is disturbingly high;
- we are starting to see the transfer of welfare dependency across generations;
- there are examples around Australia where, notwithstanding that there are job vacancies, certain members of the community are not only prepared, but feel entitled to exploit the social safety net;
- the labour market marginalisation of older unemployed and people with disabilities are issues needing to be addressed;
- the increasing dependence of both sole-parent and low-income dual parent families on parenting allowance, rather than self-provision through employment is a matter of concern (Newman, 1999).

Appendix 2: Information for Centrelink

18 January, 2008

Peter Humphries,
Acting National Manager Social Work Services,
Centrelink ,
PO Box 7800,
CANBERRA ACT 2610

Dear Peter,

Re: Research study: Social Work Engagement with the Reforming State in Australia

I am writing to follow-up our telephone discussion to provide further information about the study I am undertaking into social work engagement with the reforming state in Australia. This study will form part of a Doctor of Social Work thesis I am writing under the supervision of Dr. Susan Goodwin, Senior Lecturer in the Social Work and Policy Studies Program in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

This project is a detailed study of organisational change and social work practice within Centrelink. The study will explore the influence of emerging welfare reform discourses and evolving public service governance practices on the way Centrelink social workers negotiate individual and professional identities within the workplace. The study seeks to explore strategies adopted by individual social workers in Centrelink to respond to a changing context of practice through their daily engagement with the micropolitics of their workplaces.

The research will involve individual interviews with ten Centrelink social workers who have been involved in the transformation of the public sector income support and employment services field over the past decade. Social workers with more than ten years experience in the organisation will be invited to participate in the interview. The interview will elicit narratives from these social workers about the meanings they make of their experiences for themselves as individuals, as members of the social work profession and as Centrelink employees.

This study seeks to develop theoretical understandings about the rapidly changing context of social work practice in Australia. Specifically, the project will extend the terms of a current debate within the profession about possibilities for articulating new forms of critical social work practice within a transforming welfare state apparatus. The research will move

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this debate beyond the existing broad analysis of social work's future viability and social ethic to focus on a detailed study of one context in which social workers have been required to actively engage with critical policy and practice challenges on a daily basis.

I have obtained ethics approval for this study from The University of Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee and I am seeking to commence the first round of interviews in early 2008. I do not intend to approach potential respondents directly. I plan to recruit interested social workers for this study through sending a copy of the attached notice to the Managers of Social Work in metropolitan and rural New South Wales with a request to them to forward the notice to social workers within their administrative areas. The recruitment notice asks interested social workers to contact me directly to clarify details of the study before a commitment is made to participate.

If you would like to discuss this proposed research further, please contact me on the above telephone number.

Yours sincerely,

Deborah Hart,
DSW Candidate

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Appendix 3: Invitation to participate in a research study

<div align="right">14 February, 2008</div>

<div align="center">

Processes of Social Work Engagement with the Reforming State in Australia

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Centrelink social workers in metropolitan and rural New South Wales with more than 10 years practice experience in the DSS and Centrelink are invited to participate in research being conducted by Deborah Hart as part of a Doctor of Social Work study under the supervision of Dr. Susan Goodwin in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

This project is a detailed study of organisational change and social work practice within Centrelink. The study seeks to explore strategies adopted by individual social workers in Centrelink to respond to a changing context of practice through their daily engagement with various aspects of their workplaces.

The interview will take around 60 to 90 minutes and will explore meanings participants make of their practice experience for themselves as individuals, as members of the social work profession and as Centrelink employees. The interview will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient to participants. With the permission of participants, the interviews will be audio taped and if individual participants wish, a copy will be sent to them for comment. The research is confidential and no names or identifying information will be used in any form when reporting results. Participation in this research is **entirely voluntary**. Participants may withdraw their involvement at any time without having to provide a reason and without consequences. If participants choose to withdraw from the study, all data already collected will be destroyed.

**If you would like to participate in this study or to discuss the details further before making a commitment, please contact Deborah Hart by telephone on:
(02) 9351 2281 or by email at: <u>d.hart@edfac.usyd.edu.au</u>**

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Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811 (telephone); (02) 9351 6706 (Facsimile) or gbriody@mail.usyd.edu.au (email).
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Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form

I, ………………………………………………………….... give consent to my

participation in

Name (please print)

the research project titled, **Social work identity at the intersection of welfare policy**

reforms and public service management reforms in Australia.

In giving my consent I acknowledge that:

1. The procedures required for the project and the time involved have been explained to me and any questions I have about the project have been answered to my satisfaction.

2. I have read the *Participant Information Sheet* and have been given the opportunity to discuss the information and my involvement in the project with the researcher.

3. I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, without affecting my relationship with the researcher now or in the future.

4. I understand that my involvement is strictly confidential and no information about me will be used in any way that reveals my identity.

Signed:
…………………………………………………………………………………………
Name:
…………………………………………………………………………………………..

Appendix 5: Participant Information Sheet

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Working title of research project: *Social work identity at the intersection of welfare policy reforms and public service management reforms in Australia*

Deborah Hart from the Social Work and Policy Studies Program in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney is conducting research to understand the influence of emerging welfare reform discourses and evolving public service governance practices on the way Centrelink social workers negotiate individual and professional identities within the workplace. This research will form part of a Doctor of Social Work project under the supervision of Dr. Susan Goodwin, Senior Lecturer in the Social Work and Policy Studies Program in the Faculty of Education and Social Work at the University of Sydney.

This project is a detailed study of organisational change and social work practice within Centrelink. The study seeks to explore strategies adopted by individual social workers in Centrelink to respond to a changing context of practice through their daily engagement with various aspects of their workplaces.

Current Centrelink social workers with more than ten years practice experience in a metropolitan or rural DSS/Centrelink setting are invited to participate in this study. The study will involve one individual interview. The interview will take around 60 to 90 minutes and will explore meanings participants make of their practice experience for themselves as individuals, as members of the social work profession and as Centrelink employees. The interview will be conducted at a time and place that is convenient to participants. With the permission of participants, the interviews will be audio taped and if individual participants wish, a copy will be sent to them for comment.

The research is confidential and no names or identifying information will be used in any reporting of results, including the thesis or any conference presentations or articles in scholarly journals. Non-identifying information and data will be stored in a password-protected computer in Deborah Hart's office at the University of Sydney. Paper copies of interview transcripts will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the same room. In accordance with University of Sydney regulations, all interview data will be stored for a period of 7 years following the completion of the study. At the end of this period, all electronic data will be deleted and written records will be shredded. Dr. Susan Goodwin will be the only other person who has access to non-identifying interview data.

Participation in this research will be voluntary. Participants may withdraw their involvement at any time without having to provide a reason and without consequences. If participants choose to withdraw from the study, all data already collected will be destroyed.

If you would like to participate in this research project or to discuss the details of the study in more detail before making a commitment, please **ring** me on (02 9351 2281) or send an **email** to: d.hart@edfac.usyd.edu.au

Yours sincerely,

Deborah Hart

Any person with concerns or complaints about the conduct of a research study can contact the Senior Ethics Officer, Ethics Administration, University of Sydney on (02) 9351 4811 (telephone); (02) 9351 6706 (Facsimile) or gbriody@mail.usyd.edu.au (email).

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Appendix 6: Social Work Interview Schedule

1. Social work in DSS

Q: How did you come to work as a social worker in the Department of Social Security?

Q: What are your most vivid memories of your early years as a social worker in DSS?

Q: What kept you going through this time?

Q: What criteria do you think was used to assess you as a social worker in DSS?

Q: What were your most positive experiences as a social worker in DSS?

2. The transition from DSS to Centrelink

Q: What do you recall about the election of the Howard Coalition Government in March 1996?

Q: What do you remember about the abolition of the CES and DSS and the creation of Centrelink?

Q: What are your memories of the changes that took place for the DSS staff?

Q: The government introduced the principle of contestability into its service agreements with Centrelink. What are your memories of the impact of this?

3. Centrelink 2000 to 2004 – service delivery and policy changes

Q: This period was represented as a time of major change – "we are a new and better   organisation". What are your memories about what was happening at that time for you?

Q: Around the year 2001, social workers were encouraged to take an enterprising stance towards their work. What are your memories of this time?

Q: Around 2002, 2003, Centrelink was talking about 'community partnerships'. How do you remember this initiative?

Q: What are your memories of the 'social participation' agenda?

Q: How did the social work role change during this time?

Q: What criteria do you think was used to assess the value of the social work service and individual social workers at this time?

Welfare policy reform:

Q: Another side of this – you were dealing with policies that changed significantly over time. What do you recall about these changes?
[PROMPT]: 'Social Participation', 'Activity testing', 'Exemptions', 'Non payment periods'

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4. Centrelink post-Sue Vardon (2005-2007)

Q: Sue Vardon appeared to leave very suddenly and Centrelink was moved into the Department of Human Services. What impact did that have on the organisation and on social work?

Q: There was a particular time when policy and processes were becoming increasingly punitive. What was it like to come into work when that was happening?

Q: It seems from outside that over the past couple of years, the Government has been trying to tighten things up again – to re-introduce a more traditional public service design. What do you think that was that about?

Q: [PROMPT]: Disappearance of shared behaviours and return to focus on the APS Values?

Assessing value:

Q: I'd like to know about work you've been involved in that makes you feel good about being a social worker in Centrelink.

Q: What qualities do you think a social worker in Centrelink needs to have to be effective in this environment?

Q: Tell me what sustains you in this job and keeps you interested ?

Postscript – imagining the future

Q: How are you feeling about the future of Centrelink and the social work service following the recent change of government?

Final question:

Q: Is there anything else you would like to tell me about that we haven't already covered?