



Researching Practises of Risk: Inside the Social Work Office

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ABSTRACT

Very little research has been conducted on how statutory social workers undertake their risk investigations into alleged child abuse. Moreover, very little research has explored the risk discourses as utilised and understood by social workers. For my doctoral work, I set out to learn from child welfare workers as they 'talked' about risk, to hear the inconsistencies and hesitations about 'risk' within their working practises. A qualitative research strategy was designed, and this paper overviews that design and reflects on my research experience. This research strategy became my whare (traditional Maori tribal meeting house), my methodological house, where I drew strength in times of intellectual strain, and where I rested, as I undertook and successfully completed doctoral work. This paper is my methodological account of researching practises of risk within child welfare settings in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, something I struggled to locate in the literature as a beginning doctoral student.

Keywords: Risk, Critical Incident Technique, Child Protection, Ethnography, Social Work

INTRODUCTION

Risk is one of the most influential yet least researched set of discourses in contemporary child welfare. This is rather surprising given the enormous public, political and academic scholarship interest paid to it. As a social worker, with a significant professional background in statutory child welfare, and undertaking graduate studies in social work and sociology, I became increasingly interested in how risk discourses were influencing and shaping the work. As the language of risk became increasingly drawn on in practice settings, there was a danger that a common set of assumptions were employed. We talked of 'high-risk' and 'low-risk' and this set up particular ways of constructing the work and the professional practises that followed.

For my doctoral work, I set out to learn from child welfare workers as they 'talked' about risk, to hear the inconsistencies and hesitations about 'risk' within their working practises. For these reasons, a qualitative research strategy was designed, and this paper overviews that design and reflects on my research experience. This research strategy became my whare (traditional Maori tribal meeting house), my methodological house, where I drew strength in times of intellectual strain, and where I rested, as I undertook and successfully completed doctoral work. This paper is my methodological account of researching practises of risk within child welfare settings in Aotearoa/ New Zealand, something I struggled to locate in the literature as a beginning doctoral student. I read several theses where methodological accounts abound, yet wondered why so few of these interesting chapters are not edited for publication.

My work utilised the qualitative research strategies of interviewing, ethnography and participant observation, because understanding social workers' perspectives of risk assessment and knowledge construction involved an interactive developmental process between me as researcher and those participating in this study. A focus on work practises,

through the case accounts told to me by social workers, was a route to accessing information about social workers' constructions of risk. I was interested in the things that social workers use, employ, deploy, and operate, in the 'doing' of child protection work, the interrelationships between the social contexts in which people work, and the activities conducted there. Callon and Law (1997) argue that the researcher needs to consider how people make the various connections to form the networks they participate in. I was interested in the network of relationships between court affidavits, child abuse notifications, the computer-assisted risk assessment tool, and other parts of the work that mobilised social work activity (Woolgar, 1991).

Qualitative research is termed 'knowledge constructing' (Gilgun & Abrams, 2002), and a way to re-present authentic experiences (Silverman, 2001). Silverman (1993) terms this style of research the social organisation of description; however, qualitative researchers need to move beyond description and consider the interdependence of institutions and activity (Layder, 1993). Understanding this complex interdependence is not usually amenable to quantitative analysis. It involves attention to accounts about activity and ethnographic observation and immersion in the contexts in which that activity occurred.

Qualitative and quantitative research methodologies have traditionally been regarded as epistemologically divergent, influenced by different philosophical foundations. More recently, there has been debate within the social sciences about how these once divergent methodological positions can assist, that is, operate together in knowledge building. This is apparent in psychology (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1996; Michell, 2004) and social work (Connolly, 2001; Smith, 2001), where increasing support is given to the utilisation of qualitative *and* quantitative methods in social science research projects. Everitt (1998), however, argues that the merging of quantitative and qualitative research methodologies is problematic philosophically. She argues that the researcher's philosophical position is crucial in research to enable a critical consideration of the methodology and context of research practice. Similarly, Henwood et al., (1996) argue that feminist psychology needs to resist a quantitative paradigm that potentially renders some voices invisible while privileging the dominant, often that of the male researcher. This is supported by Everitt (1998) in that the researcher's philosophical position need not shift to incorporate or be incorporated by a more dominant research paradigm. According to Everitt (1998), the rise of managerialism in social work has provided a context for quantitative research to become dominant as this provides a closer fit with evaluative research and accountability discourses. This paper argues for qualitative research to underpin social work knowledge and practice developments because of this.

Setting up

The child protection arena was an obvious area of focus for my doctoral work. First, this is the practice area where I have the most professional experience. I considered that this would assist me in this research project and that my practice might also be usefully informed by the information about constructions of risk generated through the research process. Second, I had experienced major internal reviews of both the Australian and New Zealand child protection systems, where risk assessment technologies were introduced and regarded as best practice. In the US and the UK, risk assessment technology was developed in the wake of tragedies from within the child protection systems. In New Zealand, a national risk assessment system (Risk Estimation System, RES) was introduced in 1996 to provide a consistent risk assessment process (Smith, 1998). With such an interest in the development and implementation of risk assessment systems, it was surprising that research has been slow to critically look at how social workers construct risk (Ferguson, 2004).

Analyzing the social construction of risk objects can speed progress toward understanding how networks of risks, and efforts to control them, get embedded in the socio- and sociotechnical-fabric. (Hilgartner, 1992, p. 53)

Very little research has been conducted on how statutory social workers undertake their risk investigations into alleged child abuse. Moreover, very little research has explored the risk discourses as utilised and understood by social workers. There was no available literature in New Zealand on how discourses a risk are used within this work, and, more particularly, how social workers use risk discourses in conversations about their practice. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee, and the Department of Child, Youth and Family's (CYF) Research Access Committee. Consultation with my academic supervisors was a useful process throughout the project. This prompted me to consider a range of ethical issues: What would I do if a social worker disclosed practice that was unethical or dangerous? How would I proceed if a crime was disclosed in this research? I was also a social worker from CYFS undertaking academic research as part of a higher degree. Where did this leave me ethically if I became aware of dangerous or unsafe practice? Supervision with my manager at CYFS and academic consultation at the University assisted me in the management of these issues.

I planned to visit individual offices (sites) of CYFS for two reasons. First, as travel was involved in this study, I wanted to maximise the costs involved by spending time on the ground in one location. Second, I wanted to be able to interview social workers in their workplace. As a social worker, I was able to spend time with other social workers, have coffee with them, and immerse myself in the context of their office for a few days. By spending time in the offices, I was also able to discuss the research *kaupapa* (set of core principles) and answer any questions staff had concerning the research and their participation. Latour (1999) asserts just this point:

Actors know what they do and we have to learn from them not only what they do, but how and why they do it. It is us, the social scientists, who lack knowledge of what they do, and not they who are missing the explanation of why they are unwittingly manipulated by forces exterior to themselves and known to the social scientist's powerful gaze and method. (Latour, 1999, p. 19)

The Critical Incident Technique

My data collection design was influenced by the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) (Flanagan, 1954; Fook, 1996). The CIT methodology has been increasingly used within social science research to gain rich and detailed reflections of decision-making processes in casework (Byrne, 2001). The CIT allows access to information about a wide range of incidents from which a rich understanding of the issues can emerge. Fook (1996) argues that CIT is suitable for social work research and social work supervision, as this method allows a detailed focus on the issues that are important and salient to the worker. The subjective experiences around working in child protection are rendered visible because this method asks workers to describe the context and practice issues that they define as representing the best example from their practice. The CIT provides a framework for case recall because the accounts told by participants are about their own experiences. The social workers who participated in the study provided me with a range of both complex and more straightforward assessment accounts where risk discourses featured. This collection of data provided the basis for my analysis of how discourses of risk interact with practice decisions.

Contemporary CIT analysis considers that “each incident is a non reducible unit of analysis whose significance is best understood by interpreting the actors’ behaviour as purposeful attempts to achieve a goal and construct meaning in a particular context” (Boreham et al., 2000, p. 87). The method is found in the nursing and hospital-focussed literature (Hensing, McKenzie, & Stridsman, 1999; Bergamasco, Rossi, Amancio, & Carvlaho, 2002; Boreham et al., 2000), and in particular, is used to explore aspects of health-based practice from workers’ perspectives (Bendtsen, Hensing, McKenzie et al., 1999; Colnerud, 1997). It has been used in research on work-place bullying (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith, & Pereira, 2002), ethical conflicts for teachers (Colnerud, 1997), and hospitality issues (Callan, 1998). A review of the social work literature indicates that CIT has also been used together with a case vignette discussion (Sadique, 1996). Across all these studies, the authors found that the methodology, while time-consuming, provided detailed information for analysis on the content and structure of the incidents under question.

The strengths of the CIT method are that the research participant recalls their own experience of an event, in this case the assessment process, and the researcher asks open-ended questions directed at clarification and detail. Although Flanagan (1954) suggests that recall is best for recent events, Fook (2002) argues that both straightforward and difficult experiences are easily recalled by the participant. The CIT has been applied in social work training and supervision (Fook, 1996), and in operational procedural updates, debriefing, and research into how airline crew make decisions (Flanagan, 1954). In my reading of the literature, I located five steps in the undertaking of CIT research:

- Determine the general aim of the activity under review (assessment process where risk discourses are spoken about).
- Develop an incident of this activity (through asking social workers to describe specific incidents/cases).
- Collect the data about this activity (facilitate discussion: record/take fieldnotes).
- Analyse the data (organise material in NUDIST files, develop coding categories, read and re-read interviews transcripts).
- Interpret and report the findings (thesis/conferences/consultation/journal articles/feedback to participants).

As a method of data collection, CIT can assist the researcher to gain an understanding of a particular experience or case in recall. In asking social workers to recall effective (straightforward) and less than effective (more difficult) experiences, I gained a rich source of child protection experiences for analysis. I found that rich detail about the assessment process was provided by workers as they recalled cases that were defined as either complex or straightforward. Workers told me that they *knew the case well* and that *this is a great example* in their recalling of particular cases.

I selected this approach because I wanted to access the assessment experiences of social workers, where decisions were both straightforward and more difficult, and to consider how risk was constructed through these accounts. Critical incident recall assisted in the focus for the interviews, thus reducing the time required for each interview. Rapport was built prior to the interview being recorded, and so clarification questions, informed consent procedures, and engagement occurred before the taped interview took place.

Kaupapa Maori Influences

Social work faces increased pressures and public scrutiny. Therefore, Smith (2001) argues, research into practice is important in assisting the identity and development of social work practice. Thus, it was important for this research to consider the epistemological and ontological assumptions held by Maori and non-Maori. These assumptions have been labelled

'different baskets of knowledge' (Tolich & Davidson, 1999). However, ethnicity and cultural identity are diverse across people's experiences. I tried to avoid assumptions about how specific research participants saw the world from a particular 'basket of knowledge', by asking each participant to talk about their practice accounts. While diversity occurs in all strata of society, I approached this research drawing on historical realism as a theory that argues reality is shaped by a process of social, political, cultural, gender and economic issues that come to be understood over time (Guba & Lincoln, 1994).

There is a body of literature on issues relating to research relationships with Maori and Pacifica people (Kiro, 2000; Smith, 1999; Southwick, 2001). This literature notes that the construction of 'others' in statistics and research has the potential to further marginalise already marginalised groups. As an educated male Pakeha social worker and researcher I explored the literature that discussed researching across and outside my cultural identification.

The anthropological literature addresses cross-cultural research methods (Lewin & Leap, 1996; Spencer-Oatey, 2000), however, this is a largely international body of work. From the Aotearoa/New Zealand perspective, Batty (2002) asks how she, as a Pakeha identified woman, should undertake research with Maori, arguing that a Pakeha interpretation of Maori engagement is woven through her research. She considers that Pakeha should not avoid attention to research endeavours that attend to Maori experience. At the same time, she considers it important that the limitations of their research analysis should be acknowledged.

Traditionally, research has been undertaken by non-Maori into and on Maori people, sometimes with little attention to understandings of how Maori see the issue(s) under investigation or responsibility to participants (Cram cited in Smith, 2001; Smith, 1999). More recently, research by non-Maori *with* Maori has assisted in the development of cultural understandings. *Puao-te-Ata-tu* (Daybreak) (1986) is an example of such collaboration, whereby Pakeha women along with Maori were instrumental in developing the initial research into institutional racism within the then Department of Social Welfare. This report emerged in a context of global struggle around gendered, cultural, and sexual oppression that led to the governmental call for an inquiry.

Smith (2001) argues for the possibility of bi-cultural research projects that provide mutually beneficial outcomes across cultural groups. I was guided by the *whangai* model (adoptions model) of research (Cram cited in Smith, 2001), where the researcher becomes part of the 'whanau' of research participants. Being a social worker who brought experiences of doing child protection work in Christchurch and Sydney, also allowed me to be part of the research field because I held knowledge about the office jargon, experience in the field of child protection, and held a current CYFS identification badge.

I entered the practice environments of Maori, Pacifica, and Pakeha identified social workers. I also entered the practice world of women, men, new graduates, internationally trained social workers, excited social workers, jaded social workers, social workers who had dealt with death, and social workers who were terrified that a child on their case-load might die. I identified myself as a social worker who had been employed inside CYFS on previous occasions and added that I was a researcher, an educated Pakeha male. While Batty (2002) reported gate-keeping and other delays in accessing key people in both Maori and non-Maori areas of social policy, I found my access and fieldwork inside CYFS ran smoothly.

Being Inside The Social Work Offices

At each office, I was constantly struck by how busy social workers were. However, there was significant interest in this research, and, as a result, I undertook more interviews than I had originally planned. Each participant was an individual. Each worked for the same statutory organisation in Aotearoa/New Zealand (or did), during the period from September 2002 to March 2003. The expression of interest in social work practice was reflected in my being welcomed into the whanau of each site. People appeared comfortable with talking about their practice with me during the interview. I respected the research participants as people, as social workers, as Maori, as Samoan, as Tongan, as Pakeha, as women and men undertaking the work of child protection. I did this through the initial overview I presented at each site, responding to questions, inviting participation, and providing the option to withdraw at any stage.

Issues associated with doing insider research emerged early in the process for me. I have a professional identity as a social worker. This identity has developed from my training in social work and professional practice. The kaupapa of social work and the core values and the principles distinguishing social work from other disciplines are woven through the practice framework I draw on, and are added to as my work continues. However, being a part-time social worker for CYFS has raised questions from social workers around research ownership. I have responded to these questions by way of situating the research as an academic project, supported and supervised by staff of the University of Canterbury. In addition, I assured people that my knowledge of the CYFS system assisted the research process, that all information would be treated as confidential, and that no one other than the researcher, transcriber, and academic supervisors would have access to the raw data generated by this inquiry. Words of warning were given to me early on:

I am sure you take this seriously, but I guess I would say to you, take it doubly carefully and doubly seriously and really, really look after the information, because it will be given to you by people who are already under pressure and who will be worried about the extra pressure, and there will be people who won't tell you things because they are too frightened to. (Social Worker - Pilot Study)

I actively used my insider status to facilitate the engagement and overcome concerns raised by social workers about confidentiality and ethics. However, the pilot interviews raised some interesting questions and discussion points for me. In the following transcript, a participant questioned the process of gaining consent.

Social Worker: Their (the client's) permission wasn't asked for and indeed you've asked for mine.

Interviewer: That's right, CYFS has given me approval to talk to workers around case examples.

The ethics associated with the use of client information was raised early on. The focus for my research remained on what social workers had to say about how they did the work of assessment. The vehicle to access the working experiences of social workers was their actual casework, and this, invariably, meant client details. I ensured confidentiality to social workers and their clients, and the security of interview details as part of this research project.

Loitering with intent

Semi-structured interviews with 70 CYFS social workers were conducted over 14 sites of practice. The interviews conducted with social workers in child protection, together with 20

background interviews with supervisors and practice managers, provided the core data for analysis. The study did not involve the selection of a statistical sample of New Zealand social workers. Rather, sites of practice in different parts of the country were chosen, and access to these offices was negotiated with CYFS practice managers. All workers in child protection in these offices were informed about the study, and all those who agreed to participate were interviewed. I was interested in the artefacts that are often missing from practice records: the data, reflections, experiences and observations that are erased in the production of case notes, affidavits, and computer records. These missing artefacts are the 'smells of practice' that Ferguson (2004) refers to. Stories about risk elicited in semi-structured interviews with social workers aimed to capture the 'smells of practice'.

Central to my fieldwork was spending time in each office, sitting at a desk, taking coffee with social workers, and arranging interviews that suited social workers. I spent 35 days in 14 CYFS offices, interviewing social workers, observing office culture, and mixing with the teams. This was done during staggered time periods to allow time for reflection between each trip. In addition to this, I attended a number of meetings with groups of staff to overview the research. I also met with supervisors, managers, and practice managers, again answering questions about the research and gaining an overview of the office organisation. I was inside the fields and communities of social work practice, 'loitering with intent' and following the working practises of risk.

The interviews with social workers were analysed through a process of manual and computer assisted organisation. I used the qualitative data analysis software tool, NUDIST,¹ for two reasons. First, the number of interviews was substantially larger than I had first anticipated. The large amount of data was more manageable using a computer-assisted package such as NUDIST. Second, the analysis of the data was ongoing throughout my writing and NUDIST made it possible to recode and data search when needed. As ideas developed, and memos were written, further coding was undertaken. I also returned again and again to the tapes and transcripts and to listen, re-read, and consider the accounts social workers told about particular cases and their decisions.

Hargreaves (2002) argues that coding a complete transcript is unnecessary; however, I found that this allowed me to be closer to the data, given that the majority of interviews were transcribed by a typist. The process of coding and recoding was done at the same time as reading and re-reading the interviews. Through using NUDIST to identify the coding nodes that emerged, I developed a number of trees from the material. The four final trees correspond with material considered in the following four papers: the social worker as risk assessor, the family/whanau interventions generated by risk assessments, and relationships with actors and organisations external to CYFS. An academic paper on the Risk Estimation System (RES) emerged through the coding process.

Both Hargreaves' (2002) and MacGibbon's (2002) doctoral research provided pointers for analysis that I found useful. Using large pieces of paper to diagram the connections between coding nodes (MacGibbon, 2002) was a creative balance to the organised process of NUDIST, and assisted my own need for structure and order in research. When writing, I could move easily between NUDIST and Microsoft Word and this allowed for a closer analysis of the

¹ NUD*IST - Non-numerical Unstructured Data by processes of Indexing Searching and Theory-building (www.qsrinternational.com).

transcript material during the writing stage. As my writing progressed, I could easily move between transcripts and NUDIST, to consider the contextual issues relating to each interview. NUDIST facilitated rich data analysis, despite critiques of its limitations in data analysis in distancing the researcher from their data (MacBride-Stewart, 2001). However, it took some months for me to learn the NUDIST package.

How the social workers 'storied' their practice experience highlighted a variety of discourses in operation. Practice accounts that feature decision-making showed how the workers frame their practice, and in what ways risk discourses are constructed and used in social work.

Discourses are structures of knowledge, claims, and practices through which we understand, explain, and decide things... They are frameworks or grids of social organization that make some social actions possible while precluding others. A discourse is best understood as a system of possibility for knowledge and for agency. (Parton, 1999, p. 106)

I initially approached this exploratory research without terming my work 'grounded theory'. Through a close reading of the grounded theory literature, and discussions in academic supervision, I realised that I had already drawn on and utilised a grounded theory approach to my work. Taking this approach, the researcher moves between data collection and analysis in a systematic yet open manner. Questions and ideas are generated as the researcher moves between data collection and analysis. Areas for further exploration, both within the data and through ongoing fieldwork, emerge as the project unfolds rather than being fully defined at the outset (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

The researcher is central to a grounded theoretical analysis, as he or she defines both in-vivo and sociological codes from the data. In attending to the voices, attitudes, emphases and meanings of the research participants, in-vivo codes are identified from the collected data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Through attending to the sociological codes, researchers draw on their understandings of the emphasis they assign to meaning. Meaning is constructed from this weaving between the data and the forms of framing and sense making that researchers bring to their analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Moreover, interpretation is constructed from researchers' active *engagement* with the data.

Throughout the analysis process, I wrote memos, I sketched diagrams, I returned to the taped interviews and initial fieldnotes. By re-reading transcripts and moving between drafting papers and NUDIST, I had the freedom to enjoy the data and development of ideas, while working within an organised structure. Using NUDIST was also crucial in managing emotional aspects of qualitative research as I jotted questions and memos. Writing and diagramming produced tangible ideas and I was able to track the development of my ideas by returning to earlier memos and diagrams. I returned to the transcripts with my developing theories. The methodology was time-consuming, expensive, and required a time commitment from CYFS staff. I overcame these limitations in a number of ways. I returned to the social workers with my ideas and reported back my initial findings from analysis of the interviews and my field notes. My discussions with social workers throughout the process of researching allowed me to continually reflect on my findings and return again and again to the data.

ENDNOTE

While I have followed the stories of cases from notification to decision-making, as recalled by workers I have not been 'following' the social worker. Nor has the emotional impact of practice been a focus for this research. Rather, the CIT was used to elicit accounts about

straightforward and complicated cases of assessing risk. The aim of the research was not to get to a 'truth' or explore the emotional impact on social workers of particular cases, but to research the understandings and/or discourses of risk used by social workers as they engaged in child protection practice. This methodology helped me locate the ways the social workers framed and positioned risk in their accounts of the cases they worked on.

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