

Labelling Clients 'Risky': Social Work and the Neo-liberal Welfare State

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Summary

The literature on neo-liberal transformations of the welfare state and forms of governance—inspired by Foucault's concept of governmentality—has much to offer theorizations of the role of social work in contemporary society. Rather than assuming a top/down analysis in which power is located within individuals or institutions, power is 'not a matter of imposing a sovereign will, but instead a process of enlisting the cooperation of chains of actors who "translate" power from one locale to another' (Garland, 1997, p. 182). The profession of social work occupies an intermediary space, charged with 'translating' state power to individuals, families, groups and communities. In this paper, I use the experience of criminalized women to bring to life the theoretical understandings offered by neo-liberal analyses of the regulation of social marginality. I focus particularly on one key feature of neo-liberal governance—'risk thinking'—and examine the gendered nature of risk as a neo-liberal regulatory strategy across the penal-welfare complex. I conclude with a discussion of lessons learned from criminalized women about social work and risk assessment.

Key Words: Female offenders, women's prisons, risk, neo-liberal, welfare

Introduction

The literature on neo-liberal transformations of the welfare state and forms of governance—inspired by Foucault's (1994) (as cited in Faubion) concept of *governmentality*—has much to offer theorizations of the role of social work and social work practice in contemporary society. Rather than assuming a top/down analysis in which power is located within individuals or institutions, power is 'not a matter of imposing a sovereign will, but instead a process of enlisting the cooperation of chains of actors who

“translate” power from one locale to another’ (Garland, 1997, p. 182). The profession of social work occupies an intermediary space, charged with ‘translating’ state power to individuals, families, groups and communities. Increasingly, social workers across a wide range of spheres are required to engage in regulatory practices that reinforce and perpetuate the goals of neo-liberal policy and ideologies.

A key feature of neo-liberal governance is ‘risk thinking’ (Rose, 2000). Risk thinking has been traced across the penal and welfare systems as a method of regulating marginalized people in jails/prisons, child protection, social assistance and mental health services. Clearly, then, risk thinking has direct implications for the practice of social work and in fact, as Webb (2006) has argued, forms the bedrock of social work practice in the current neo-liberal context.

Rose (2000) refers to marginalized populations such as those experiencing homelessness, mental illness, drug addiction, criminalization or poverty as occupying ‘zones of exclusion’. He argues that contemporary risk management strategies are directed at those who are thought ‘unable or unwilling to enterprise their lives or manage their own risk, incapable of exercising responsible self-government’ (Rose, 2000, p. 331). In this paper, I use the experience of criminalized women (themselves occupying multiple zones of exclusion) to bring to life the theoretical understandings offered by neo-liberal analyses of the regulation of social marginality. Neo-liberal socio-political and economic transformations have contributed to women’s poverty worldwide and have brought an increasing number of women into jails and prisons (Sudbury, 2005). Women are the fastest growing population of prisoners in countries such as Canada, the USA, Britain and Australia (Balfour and Comack, 2006). Criminalized women generally come in contact with not only the criminal justice system, but also with other systems such as mental health, child protection and social assistance—all spheres within which social work plays a role. The purpose of this study was to examine the re-integration experiences of women who had served federal prison sentences (two years or more). The focus of this paper is professional constructions of risk, and the effects of labelling clients risky, as these themes were omnipresent in women’s talk about their criminalization experiences. Governmentality scholars have traced a congruence in how marginalized populations are regulated across sectors (Cruikshank, 1996; Garland, 2001; Haney, 2004; McCorkel, 2004; Rose, 2000). I believe the reflections of participants in this study are germane not only to the work of the correctional system itself, but are easily translatable to other spheres of social work practice in which risk thinking plays a significant role.

I begin this paper with a brief description of the methodology of the study. This is followed by a discussion of risk and empowerment in the neo-liberal social welfare state, which provides the theoretical lens for this paper. Findings related to the theme of documentation, risk and subjectivity are then provided, using data from interviews with women released from

prison. I conclude this paper with a discussion of lessons learned from criminalized women for the practice of social work within a neo-liberal context.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to understand the impact of imprisonment on women and to examine their post-release experiences. In particular, I was interested in notions of community and support in relation to women's re-integration experiences. Sixty-eight women who had served federal prison sentences in Canada were interviewed. Forty-one women identified as Caucasian, twenty-two as First Nations, Metis or Inuit, four as black and the race/ethnicity of one participant is unknown. Participants were located in nineteen large and small cities across eight Canadian provinces. Interviews were between one and one-and-a-half hours and were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. Two participants did not wish to be tape-recorded so hand-written notes were taken instead. All participants were asked to choose a pseudonym for themselves by which I could refer to them in public forums. Many women said they had 'street names' or nicknames. I requested that they choose names by which they were not known in any other context. Two women chose the name 'Julie' and I have referred to them as 'Julie 1' and 'Julie 2'. Participants were recruited through individuals and organizations that work with criminalized women.

Flyers advertising the study were put up in halfway houses and community agencies. Potential participants were asked to call me or the research assistant should they wish to participate. In addition, women sometimes referred their friends to the study after they had participated. All efforts were made to ensure that women who saw the flyer within the context of service delivery agencies were aware that participation in my study (or not) would in no way affect the services provided by halfway houses, community agencies or any other organization. This point, as well as assurances of confidentiality and anonymity, was clearly articulated in an information letter and consent form.

I attempted to get participants from a variety of backgrounds and with different types of experiences with the correctional system. For example, efforts were made to obtain diversity in living arrangements, racial and cultural backgrounds, various lengths of prison sentences (two years to life), time out of prison, and type of parole (e.g. day, full, completed parole). No attempts were made to recruit women with certain types of convictions and women were not specifically asked to talk about their criminal charges (although many did). Interviews took place in halfway houses, individual homes, shelters, treatment centres and community organizations. Interviews were open-ended, semi-structured and asked questions about prison programming and services and experiences of being released back

into the community (further methodological details have been published. Please see Pollack, 2007, 2008).

The 'Punishing Welfare State', Risk and Empowerment

Neo-liberalism or 'advanced liberalism' (Rose, 2000) refers to the policy, practices and values that privilege the market, individualism, global economic trade and deregulation of businesses. One of the values underpinning neo-liberal policy changes is a disenchantment with 'big government' and 'the nanny state', both of which are seen as undermining economic and social prosperity. The social welfare state is thought to create dependencies and neo-liberal proponents suggest that less governmental controls in business will allow the market place to meet the social welfare needs of its citizens (Mullaly, 2007). The social-welfare state has thus been reconfigured; social assistance benefits and eligibility criteria have been made more stringent; employment benefits have been reduced; there have been cuts to childcare, health care, social services and mental health services; and there have been dramatic increases in the number of people incarcerated in jails and prisons. While neo-liberal governments propagate the mantra that less government in the lives of citizens is better, they simultaneously have increased government involvement in the areas of immigration control, military and the prison industrial complex (Bohrman and Murakawa, 2005; Garland, 2001; Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003). (The prison industrial complex refers to the relationship between politicians, corporations and correctional services, which results in financial gain through the incarceration of marginalized populations (Sudbury, 2002).)

Researchers have shown that there is an inverse relationship between low social assistance rates and high incarceration rates, particularly in the USA (Garland, 2001). Both the penal and the welfare systems have become increasingly punitive, with social assistance regimes mirroring the suspicion, surveillance and control techniques of the penal system. As Peck (2003) writes:

[T]he once-dominant social-welfarist orientation of the state has progressively given way to, or been unevenly displaced by, new modes of governmental rationality based on penal management and punitive regulation, both of poverty and poor subjects (Peck, 2003, p. 225).

Punitive regulation is most poignantly activated once individuals and families either are forced into the state apparatus (criminal justice system, child protection system) or make claims on the state (social assistance, employment, medical benefits) (Garland, 1997). With the shift towards a more 'punishing welfare state' (Morgen and Maskovsky, 2003), there have also been shifts in how social marginality is governed, particularly in regard to those who are subject to government intervention based

upon their status as welfare recipients, child protection clients, prisoners/parolees, substance abusers, mental health patients and the like. Government and business herald the importance of de-regulation, yet people living in poverty have actually experienced *increased* regulation (as have bodies attempting to move across national borders). The orientation, methods of administration and means of governing within the penal-welfare complex have undergone significant changes, resulting in the regulation of the poor not through 'less government but *different* government' (Peck, 2003, p. 224).

One such practice is the identification and management of risk. Taken from the actuarial insurance realm, 'risk thinking' circulates within and across social work spheres. Risk discourse or risk thinking is a standard feature of neo-liberal modes of governing and has 'become central to the management of exclusion in post-welfare strategies of control' (Rose, 2000, p. 332). The prediction and management of risk have long been a forensic resource (Parton, 1998), but have increasingly found a home within social work practice. Risk practices are mobilized by professionals such as psychologists, psychiatrists, correctional workers and social workers to predict, control and manage the risk of marginalized people who come under their gaze. The prediction of the likelihood of future harm occurring (to self or others) is central to risk assessments. Perhaps the most familiar to social workers is the risk assessment focus in the child protection field. Parton (1998) illustrates in his history of contemporary child welfare policy in the UK how a focus upon risk prediction and management emerges within a neo-liberal socio-economic context that has depleted child protection and other social and community services of their resources. He argues that most of social workers' skills and time are devoted to separating 'high-risk' families from other families who come in contact with the child protection system. As a result, social workers in child protection teach, cajole, mandate or encourage clients to become prudent managers of their own risk.

Risk thinking is also foundational to the delivery of social assistance programmes, as a heightened focus on 'welfare fraud' takes shape (Heard and Mitchell, 2002). People requesting financial government assistance are assessed and monitored for their risk of recidivism and fraud. It is not difficult to see in this approach the punitive focus as well as the interconnectedness between social welfare provision and criminal justice discourses. As Garland (2001) states, in addition to similar invocations of stereotypes and assumptions, the penal and welfare systems share 'the same recipes for the identification of risk and the allocation of blame' (Garland, 2001, p. 201).

Empowerment rhetoric is closely linked with risk thinking and is directed towards those who are most socially excluded (Rose, 2000; Webb, 2006). Premised upon notions of an independent, self-sufficient and entrepreneurial citizen, empowerment strategies in the neo-liberal context focus upon

reworking the subjectivity of those who find themselves entangled within the state apparatus. Consequently, empowerment takes on a purely individualistic meaning, rendering structural/systemic factors irrelevant. As Rose (2000) states, empowerment 'codes the subjective substrate of exclusion as lack of self-esteem, self-worth, and the skills of self-management necessary to steer oneself as an active individual in the empire of choice' (Rose, 2000, p. 334). Social exclusion is reconfigured to be 'a state of mind' amendable to cognitive restructuring and empowerment.

The connections between risk and empowerment take on a particular gendered form across the penal-welfare system. The interpretive frame of dependency and self-esteem is used to construct women involved with welfare and penal systems as in need of empowerment (generally in the form of therapy). Mandating therapy to counter women's disempowerment is a common regulatory strategy in penal institutions (Fox, 1999; McCorkel, 2003; Pollack and Kendall, 2005) and various arms of social service provision (Reich, 2005). Researchers have expressed reservations about the use of therapy as a criminal justice or legal sanction (at the expense of other non-psychological supports), particularly for women who are disempowered through such things as poverty, racialization and violence. Carlen and Tombs (2006) refer to women's penal policy that heavily emphasizes psychological interventions as 'therapeutic'. They and others have argued that an exclusive focus on women's 'criminal mind' in many contemporary approaches to women in prison eclipses the material factors that contribute to the criminalization of women, such as addictions, poverty, inadequate social assistance levels, lack of employment opportunities and little child-care support. Polsky (1991) argues that such approaches are characteristic of 'the therapeutic state', which 'proceeds from the assumption that ... [marginal citizens] cannot govern their own lives. The state seeks to "normalize" them. ... Lower-class clients do not seem to require merely a bit of support, like their middle-class counterparts, but instead wholesale personal and family reconstruction' (quoted in Reich, 2005, p. 15). Similar to approaches taken with criminalized women, Reich (2005) illustrates how the therapeutic state operates in gendered ways in relation to mothers in the child protection system. She draws out the role that 'mandated empowerment' plays in enforcing normalizing notions of motherhood. Regardless of the particular site of state regulation, women who are mandated into empowerment are expected to co-operate with efforts to normalize them in order to decrease their risk and obtain such things as custody of their children, release from prison or various social services and resources.

For the most part, risk thinking appears to be ubiquitous across the penal and social welfare systems (Garland, 2001) and is largely unquestioned within social work (Webb, 2006). Moreover, the literature on risk in social work as well as in other fields is dominated by professional discourses and has little engagement with those who are regulated by risk discourses.

(Please see Brown's (2006) institutional ethnography of mothers involved in the Canadian child protection system for an important exception.) This paper draws upon interviews with formerly incarcerated women in Canada and focuses upon the theme of risk and social control that emerged throughout these interviews. Participants illuminated the power of risk discourses to define women's experience according to institutional and ideological narratives (Smith, 1990). Notions of risk are based upon expert discourses within the field of forensic psychology. This framing of risk provides the discursive and material context of women's in/post prison lives. Their comments on risk and subjectivity reveal the power of these institutional narratives.

Documenting Risk: Criminalized Women, Subjectivity and Social Control

Risk thinking permeates correctional practice and derives its assumptions from actuarial assessment tools designed to manage and predict the riskiness of imprisoned people. The primary instrument that was developed in Canada and is widely used in forensic settings in Australia, Britain and the USA is the LSI-R. The tool is comprised of fifty-four items answered with either a yes/no or a score of 1–3. The items target areas such as attitudes/values, family, companions, drug/alcohol and employment and calculate the risk an individual poses to the community. These types of instruments have been found to contain inherent gender, class and racial biases that perpetuate and exacerbate the marginalization of already disenfranchised populations (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2003; Silver and Miller, 2002).

How an individual is assessed affects a whole host of crucial decisions about how they experience imprisonment, programming and release. Their risk level is used to determine what kind of prison they are put in, level of monitoring while imprisoned, programming, eligibility for day passes, type of prison work placement, whether parole is granted and under what conditions, living arrangements in the community, and nature of surveillance once released. These assessments are performed and relied upon by a myriad of 'control professionals' (Rose, 2000), who write reports that get placed in the prisoner's file. One participant in this study points out:

I mean, they're going to rely on the report from the psychologist, the report from the psychiatrist, the probation officer— but, basically, they don't really know you. Their job is ... to determine whether you represent a risk to society. Ya' know. It's a big job, really (Julie 2).

The 'big job' of risk management is accomplished, as Julie 2 points out, through mobilizing the expert discourses of a variety of professions.

Many women in this study commented on the ways in which these processes privileged the texts—the ‘report from the psychologist, the report from the psychiatrist, the probation officer’—and rendered their own subjective and intellectual knowledges irrelevant. Most women were acutely aware of the significance of documentation to the process of managing their risk. In particular, women reflected upon the fact that the multitude of reports written about them reflected institutional agendas about risk reduction that disqualified their own perspectives. As Susan remarked:

... [W]ell I feel, anyway, that they say they want you to take responsibility for what you’ve done, but when you do, and you work it out for them, you’re always wrong. It’s got to be one of their shrinks or one of their people.

Correctional supervision, whether in prison or in the community, involves scrutiny of public and private lives (as does receiving social assistance and being involved with child protection services). Women in this study pointed out that the correctional perspectives and categories through which their behaviour was evaluated allowed little space for the actualities of their experience. Somewhat paradoxically, then, the intense scrutiny and surveillance to which criminalized women are subjected—the very *visibility* of their lives—actually rendered them invisible. As another participant, Julie 1, observed: ‘[W]hen they—the staff—come face-to-face with somebody, *really* face-to-face—they can’t even see you.’ In many ways, ‘not being seen’ on an individual level is built directly into the structure of risk assessments. As Garland (1997) points out, risk assessment tools are not individually tailored, but are based upon assumptions about what constitutes riskiness. ‘The individual is viewed not as a distinct, unique person, to be studied in depth and known by his or her peculiarities, but rather as a point plotted on an actuarial table’ (Garland, 1997, p. 182).

The ideological narratives of corrections and, in particular, the ‘psy’ professionals who evaluate using a risk lens superseded women’s ‘primary narratives’ (Smith, 1990) about their own experiences and needs. Smith (1990) refers to *primary* narratives as one’s own subjective account of events—how one makes sense of one’s own experience. *Ideological* narratives transform personal accounts into forms that are intelligible to institutional goals and norms. The configuration and implementation of risk assessment/risk management practice inevitably reflect the ideologies of the institutional setting in which it emerges. Evaluations of risk provide the bedrock for institutional narratives about criminalized women. The discourses of risk and how to reduce/control it are textually embedded within women’s correctional files. The theme of ‘the file’ loomed large in participants’ discussion of imprisonment and community release. Marilyn’s comments reflect the transformation from a primary narrative to an institutional one, that occurs within the textual discourse of correctional files:

... they [professionals in the criminal justice system] believe everything that’s on paper. They don’t really give us a chance to tell them what

happened. They don't ever do that, they just...whatever's on paper, ok, that's the law, that's the bible, and that's what's going down. It doesn't matter what you say ... I get angry when I think about it.

Ideological narratives, often embedded within texts, entrench people within the ruling apparatus, in this case the criminal justice system. Women in this study had various strategies for dealing with correctional interpretations of their subjectivity and experiences. Julie 1, for example, eventually employed a resistance tactic in which she refused to participate in the creation of her file and to allow her primary narrative account to 'become the raw material for the ideological transformation' (Smith, 1990, p. 161):

... the first time I was there [in prison], I cooperated. Then they made some files. They write things down about you, they build a file on you, then after, they give you a copy. Then, you're looking at it thinking 'well, that's not what I said, that's not right' ... the more you cooperate, the more you realise that it gets used against you. They twist what you say around. ... So, then I said to them 'that's it. That's it. You won't get me again'. So, when I saw people, it was like ... 'what do you want to know? ... Open my file, read it, I don't have anything else to say. That's it.' It was the same thing when I came to the halfway house.

Julie 1's refusal to participate in having her own narrative rewritten can be read as an act of resistance. Although these types of measures may allow individuals to have a feeling of personal agency, they do little to actually disrupt the ideological narrative that gets created about them. Quite the contrary, resistance tactics such as Julie 1's can result in further documentation of her non-compliance, which could increase her risk status. Factoring in compliance with professional assessments, reports and treatment plans also occurs within other spheres of social work practice. Risk assessments in child protection in Canada include a section in which the level of co-operation/compliance with social worker's recommendations is rated and factored into the scoring of parent's (generally the mother's) risk level (Brown, 2006). Non-compliance is also a risk factor in Evidence-Based Practice in the mental health field wherein a decision to manage one's own medication may be considered 'wilful disobedience, rather than an assertion of autonomy' (Scheyett, 2006, p. 76).

One of the issues raised by participants in this study was that documentation created fixed narratives about the women's 'selves' rather than about their experiences or behaviour. Risk assessments and management strategies tend to constitute the subjectivity of the person whose risk is being assessed so that people themselves are characterized as 'high-risk' or 'risky'. This type of formulation is typical of neo-liberal regulatory strategies that individualize social context and valorize notions of individual responsibility. In relation to criminalized women in this study, the weight placed upon attitudinal, emotional and psychological factors in constituting women's risk ignores important factors such as poverty, violence against

women, lack of community supports, stigmatization and barriers to employment. This is not to say that emotional and psychological factors have no bearing. Rather, as Steph succinctly articulates, personal issues arise *within a social context* that has structural roots. In offering an alternative conceptualization of risk, Steph states:

I know that today a woman gets out [of prison] and she doesn't want to use [drugs] but she doesn't have no money either, so she thinks I'll just go turn a trick and make 100 bucks. But a soon as you do, that puts you at higher risk to use because then you feel shitty about yourself and you wanna numb that pain or that ugliness. So you use and then starts the whole cycle. So I mean even having no money, I mean as crazy as it sounds, puts you at risk.

It is significant that Steph qualifies her statement about the connection between poverty and risk with 'as crazy as it sounds'. Within the correctional context, references to factors that are not individual are heard as a denial of responsibility or as rationalizations for criminal behaviour (Fox, 1999). Thus, Steph *is* in fact offering a 'crazy' alternative that lies beyond the bounds of what can be said within correctional discourses.

A further implication of the many professional risk discourses is that within this frame, risk is constitutive of *subjectivity*. Being risky as an ontological state is regarded as something permanent, regardless of steps attempted to rid one's self of riskiness. Quinn (a participant in this study) analysed and challenged the relationship between being viewed as forever risky and evaluations of criminalized women's worth. She explained that punctuality—being on time for meetings with her parole officer—is seen as evidence that she is taking responsibility for her own reformation. In contrast, the same moral processes do not operate if a parole officer is late for their appointment with a parolee. Quinn recounts a time when she waited forty minutes for her parole officer to arrive and reflects upon the double standards attached to punctuality. These double standards send the message that:

You don't have nothing better to do with your time, you know what I mean?
Or your time isn't valuable, or *you're* not valuable, because you're always at risk of re-offending. And it's that constant theme of being treated that way.

Implicit in much correctional policy and practice is the idea that women's lawbreaking is related to being dependent upon drugs, men and/or the state (McCorkel, 2004; Task Force on Federally Sentenced Women, 1990). Women's risk is therefore reduced by raising their self-esteem and empowering them to make better decisions in their lives. Participants in this study spoke about the contradictions of policy language that links empowerment to women's risk of criminally offending and the reality of incarceration. Despite the correctional rhetoric of support and empowerment, women's lived experience confirms that the purpose and mandate of imprisonment are to punish and control. As Liz states, 'you can't have

it both ways'. Winn also offered a clear statement regarding the contradictions of empowerment within a prison setting:

I think I have more issues than when I went in, because the issues you go in with, you can only do so much work on them because the prison compels them and any guilt and shame and regret and all those other negative feelings just get compelled by being incarcerated. Like every day you're reminded of what a shit-ass person you are for committing a crime and how it has affected every day of your life.

The literature on women and crime is replete with references to empowerment as a means of reducing women's risk level. The problematic concept of empowerment as a purely subjective phenomenon and the contradictions of empowering women while they are locked behind walls have been amply illustrated, particularly in the Canadian literature (Hanna-Moffat, 2001; Pollack, 2000; Pollack and Kendall, 2005). Risk thinking is the ideological discourse that frames how criminalized women are constructed and understood. This narrative rejects social context and privileges attitudinal and psychological factors. As women in this study articulated, their very subjectivities are constituted through risk discourses. Empowerment as a risk reduction strategy is purely individualistic and fallacious within the context of punitive settings.

Lessons learned from criminalized women illustrate three central points about risk. First, risk is socially constructed and decontextualizing. The notion of 'being at risk for offending' embedded within the most widely used correctional risk assessment tool (the LSI-R) is predominantly founded upon attitudinal and psychological factors that are viewed as being statistically linked to crime (based on studies with men, not women). This assessment tool translates women's primary narratives about their experiences into the ideological institutional narratives of the correctional system. Prediction and management of criminalized women's risk in the community pay scant attention to the role that barriers to employment, inadequate social assistance rates and lack of community supports may play in women's lives. Second, risk appears to be a slippery concept that can quickly become constitutive of subjectivity. Measures are then taken to reform the personality, self-esteem or thinking patterns of the risky person. The notion of being risky is fundamental to neo-liberal practice with marginalized people and encourages self-regulatory strategies that illustrate a capitulation with state power. Lastly, empowerment is an empty concept when intimately linked to risk. Mandated empowerment is a contradiction in terms and is unlikely to occur when women are literally locked behind bars.

Discussion: Risk and Social Work in the Neo-liberal Context

Risk assessments are integral to contemporary social work practice (Webb, 2006) and have contributed to the 'deskilling' of social workers who have in

many ways become administrators of neo-liberal agendas (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006). The 'war on discretion' (Haney, 2004, p. 340) inherent in standardized instruments such as risk assessments not only means that recipients of services and resources are subjected to increased rigid and punitive regulation, but that workers themselves are monitored and must justify the dispensation of benefits or their assessment of a child's risk (Parton, 1998; Haney, 2004). Parton (1998) states that risk assessment, evaluation and elimination/reduction have become the *raison d'être* of child welfare social workers. Audit forms the visible track record of social worker's attempts to assess and reduce risk—therefore, the social worker's job is less about the 'right' decision and more about a 'defensible' decision. A similar rationale is advanced within the forensic context, in which correctional staff fear being held accountable for incorrectly assessing the risk of a criminalized woman. In fact, Hannah-Moffat (2004) found that many workers actually applied more stringent criteria to assess risk since correctional risk assessments were developed for men and workers were concerned about making the wrong decision about a woman's risk.

The power of risk discourse lies, in part, in its claim to an objective, empirical and predictive basis (Brown, 2006; Silver and Miller, 2002; Webb, 2006). These claims are based upon the assumption that risk can be knowable and predictable. However, the social construction of risk and the many biases inherent within risk assessments have been clearly illustrated. It has been argued that risk assessments themselves play a large role in constituting what is defined as risk (Haggerty, 1999). Risk assessments have also been found to be 'highly subjective and moralistic enterprises' (Hannah-Moffat and Shaw, 2003, p. 62). Brown's (2006) study of mothers involved with the Canadian child protection system confirms this observation. Participants in her study pointed out that risk assessment tools do not allow for extenuating circumstances, accomplishments or steps a mother has taken to improve her circumstances. Participants in Brown's study expressed concern about the long-term impact of these negative and decontextualizing risk assessments in that these reports become part of a governmental file that is very difficult to amend. Her study also illustrates that women's subjectivity is constructed through risk assessments in child protection services. For example, social workers assign numerical scores ranging from 0 (no perceived risk) to 4 (severe risk) to a series of factors deemed to predict risk (Brown, 2006, p. 359). One participant, in wondering about how the social worker reached conclusions about her risk, asked 'what if I'm not really a two?' (Brown, 2006, p. 360), pointing to the long-term implications of being labelled a '2' or a 'high-risk mother'.

The connections between risk, subjectivity and individualistic concepts of empowerment get played out in a variety of social work contexts. Several researchers have pointed to the gendered nature of these connections and how technologies of empowerment often reinforce normalizing

constructions of motherhood and heterosexual femininity. For example, in her US study of the child protection system, Reich (2005) illustrates the connections between an assessment of a mother's risk to harm her child and notions of empowerment. Reich argues that mothers in the child protection system must 'perform empowerment' in order to decrease perceptions of risk and increase their chances of having their children returned to them. This performance often takes the form of internalizing institutional scripts in order to demonstrate acquiescence to state power. For example, she illustrates that evidence of empowerment often involves demonstrating independence from men as well as a mother's willingness to put the needs of her children before her own.

The gendering of risk, empowerment and therapy is not unique to the child protection system. Women in the correctional system are often required to 'perform empowerment' in order to gain access to parole, passes and programming. Hannah-Moffat (2004) found women who framed their experiences within the correctional therapeutic discourse were more likely to be seen as a lower risk for parole. Pollack (2007) found that criminalized women who used force against their abusers were seen as having 'intimacy issues' or 'relationship problems'. These women were also encouraged to internalize this narrative in order to manage their own risk in the community. Such self-regulation is characteristic of neo-liberal governance strategies that activate technologies 'of citizenship and self-government for the evaluating and acting upon our selves so that the police, guards and doctors do not have to' (Cruikshank, 1996, p. 234). Requiring marginalized women to internalize the individualizing norms of social control agencies renders structural factors obsolete and holds them solely responsible for their plight.

As the social welfare state and its processes and policies are reconfigured, so, too, is the role of social work. Social workers are increasingly being asked to function as 'translators' of state power—a practice that undermines the social justice roots of our profession. Across many sectors, social service organizations have had infrastructure funding eroded and endured cuts to programming. Many social service organizations are relying more and more upon the private sector for their operating costs and often find themselves in competition for increasingly rare government contracts for service provision. Such effects of neo-liberal funding strategies reflect the de-valuing of social welfare provision and of those who receive government-subsidized services or resources. Increasingly, there has been a diversion of state responsibilities onto non-government organizations (NGOs), religious organizations and the private sector (Garland, 2001; Rose, 1996; Williams and Lippert, 2006). Particularly for NGOs, relying on government contracts for service provision brings them into the regulatory apparatus (Maidment, 2006). Neo-liberal funding structures such as these undermine the ability of NGOs to pursue their own agendas for social change and social justice and thus their ability to advocate is often curtailed. Instead, NGOs are

under pressure to adhere to government agendas, evaluation criteria and service delivery methods. Thus, local agencies now do the regulatory work of the state, constituting ‘control through community’ (Garland, 2001; Maidment, 2006). Social work is intimately implicated in these processes and, as Webb (2006) argues, has abandoned ‘a holistic approach to working with clients in order to rationally align itself within the dominant politics of neo-liberal managed care’ (Webb, 2006, p. 7).

As the social welfare state has fallen into disrepute and has been reconfigured as the ‘cause’ of social problems such as poverty and crime, rather than as a means of ameliorating them, social workers who are associated with the social welfare state have also suffered a decline in status (Garland, 2001, p. 150). Thus social work—a profession that seems endlessly preoccupied with its status—is further vulnerable to status-seeking methods of operation, such as adopting dominant risk management ideologies. In response to the often complicit nature of social work practice with the neo-liberal agenda, Ferguson and Lavalette (2006) call for ‘a social work of resistance’. Integral to developing such a framework is challenging standardized technologies of ‘managing risky behaviours’, since ‘a “what works” agenda that does not address issues of process, relationship and structural oppression often simply does not work’ (Ferguson and Lavalette, 2006, p. 313).

Conclusion

Although much social work research focuses upon discrete areas—medical, welfare, child protection, mental health—few critical social work researchers have investigated the commonalities in how regulatory strategies operate across these spheres. Governmentality scholars have highlighted the significance of moving from a ‘separate spheres’ approach of analysing state practices to one that examines the convergences of neo-liberal regulatory practice across institutional boundaries, such as child protection, social assistance and criminal justice spheres (Haney, 2004; McCorkel, 2004; Rose, 2000). Although these works do not focus on social work per se, the role of social work figures prominently in their analyses, given that we are often on the front lines of governing marginalized populations. Governmentality studies that make links across the welfare state (including the role played by the private sector and NGOs) help to illuminate the congruencies of heterogeneous strategies of state regulation and to bring into focus the role that social work plays in these processes. Such exposure provides opportunities for the development of alternative practices that talk back, rather than capitulate, to neo-liberal forces that exacerbate exclusion and increase the regulation of social marginality.

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