Building stronger communities —
‘risky’ business in an environment of rising public liability insurance?

The discourse of risk in human services is, everywhere, an unstable and unknown phenomenon particularly in prevention work.
—Wearing and Douse 2000, p. 2

Introduction
On 12 September 2003, the 25th anniversary of the Alma Ata declaration for Primary Health Care, the South Australian Labor Health Minister, Lea Stevens, launched a refreshed and renewed primary health care policy. In her speech she emphasised the challenges ahead in putting these policy ideas into practice and repeatedly talked about the need for ‘risk taking’ along the lines of ‘taking a challenge’, and ‘acting boldly’ to ensure that the ideas of primary health care would this time be more than rhetoric. Community participation and working to ‘strengthen local communities’ are key aspects of primary health care. These developments mirror much wider national and international trends, where communitarian discourses and practices are enjoying renewed popularity (Crisp, Swerissen & Duckett 2000; Hawe et al. 1998). The Federal Government’s Family and Community Services ‘Strengthening Families and Communities’ program is but one recent example. However, a communitarian renewal is not just peculiar to our time in history, as Bryson and Mowbray (1981) have made clear, in revealing a historical pattern of ‘community’ being regularly ‘rediscovered’.

At a number of levels this current interest in stronger communities is encouraging and positive. First, there is no shortage of critiques about the negative social consequences of a global hegemony of economic conservatism, market doctrine and individualism, from which it is argued that community building, collective activity and citizen participation are a preferred way forward (Castells 1989; Baum 1992; Rundle 1997; Craig 1998; Now We the People 2003). Many argue that in reviving a sense of ‘collective action’ and in re-valuing and re-claiming other dimensions of social life and ‘citizenship’, possibilities can emerge to offer a counterweight to these enveloping trends. Second, in times when images of terror are part of the daily diet and with them feelings of insecurity, anxiety and fear, a revival of community and collective action can be positive in reinforcing trust, hope and the ‘ties that bind us’ (Bauman 2001, p. 150; see also Cox 1995). Finally, community development activities are associated with positive health and well-being outcomes (McQueen & Ziguras 2002). For example, an evaluation of community youth theatre in ‘The Parks’ area in South Australia, part of the Adelaide Festival 2002, reports increases in self-esteem for young people, stronger community connections between diverse social groups and cross-cultural understandings as positive outcomes (McEwan 2003).
The ideas of ‘taking a risk’ and ‘challenging’ for social change have long been associated with strengthening community discourses (Ife 1995). For example the Centre for Development and Innovation in Health identifies features of best practice in primary health care as: ‘...skills in political analysis and ability to chart a path in confusing territory’ and:

...confidence and readiness to act (even where full certainty is still not possible) and to inspire others to act even where (especially where) there is uncertainty about the outcomes (CDIH 1996, p. 167).

Indeed within a community health discourse, mobilising for improved health has been about a capacity to dare to challenge, based on imaginations of ‘health for all’. This is encapsulated in international statements such as the Alma Ata Declaration referred to above and the Ottawa Charter for Health Promotion. Many argue that the extent of inequality in Australia, socially conservative views and the creep of market ideas into government policy mean that daring to challenge is as critical now as it has been in the past (for example, Baum 1995; Ife 1995).

However, ‘risk’ in contemporary social policy discourses can have other more constraining definitions. Terms such as ‘risk assessment’, ‘risk behaviours’, ‘health risk status’, ‘populations at risk’, ‘risk factors’, ‘managing risk’, ‘risk aversion’, are in common usage (Wearing & Dowse 2000), as are risk management structures and processes. For example, most government agencies in South Australia would have in place risk management committees, policies and systematic processes for assessing and managing risk. This situation reflects wider and multifaceted trends whereby risk discourses have currency (Lupton 1999).

The focus of this paper is to explore the relation of risk management and ‘taking risks’ in the context of community practice, using the situation in South Australia as an example. To what extent is there a contradiction between the premises of taking risks for change, with the uncertainty this implies, and those shaping risk management logic? Whilst it is not unfamiliar to community workers and community organizations to have to navigate contradictions (see for example, Kenny 2002), an extension of risk logic within organisations seeking to ‘strengthen communities’ would seem to raise a number of dilemmas. Can it paralyse a practice to strengthen communities? Is there another way of conceptualising risk that moves beyond the current practice? To explore these questions I draw on examples from current community development practice, media accounts and international research reports.

The management of risk

Increasingly, risk management is more at the ‘heart’ of human service operation than it has been before (Kemshall & Pritchard 1997; Ferguson 1997) and this is widespread across all levels of government, non-government organisations and the community sector. For example, the Department of Human Services (DHS) in South Australia has an extensive risk management section which markets itself with the slogan:

- Management of risk
- Management of venture
- Management of chance
- Management of time
- Management of business

Risk Management (DHS 2002).

The forces shaping the current strength of a risk management discourse in community organisations reflect the convergence of a number of dynamics (Kemshall & Pritchard 1997). Government policies concerned with assessing and managing ‘risk’ have in one regard been responses to community views and debate: for instance, to keep children safe; respond to community violence; ensure people are protected from harm in the course of work practices and everyday living; and respond to tort risks fuelled by litigation (Ferguson 1997; Manthorpe & Alaszewski 1998). A risk discourse also reveals dynamics within the changing configuration of societal institutions. For example, Wearing and Dowse write risk is ‘...remaking governance and the interactions of the state and civil society’ (2000, p 7). Its prevalence is also tied to the changes in the provision of insurance as the industry responds to complex changing global situations, such as the rise in terrorism post September 11, the collapse of major international companies, and the implications of both for capital accumulation (Kehl 2002).

Within a much more defined ‘risk environment’, change in insurance and the adoption of risk management policies and practices have been part of strategies to deal with risks (Law Council 2002). For example the Community Insurance and Risk Management Centre advises community organisations of the potential benefits of instigating risk management practices which include reducing insurance premiums:

[Benefits may include:

1. protecting your own members, friends, participants and volunteers from injury
2. protecting the committee or board from legal liability
3. improves the acceptability of your organization for public liability and other insurance
4. possible lower insurance premiums
5. improved perception of your]
Organisational approaches

In practice, as outlined by TheOurCommunity Team, organisational risk management follows a standardised procedure that starts with exploring ‘what can go wrong’ and ‘how can it happen’, ‘what can be done to prevent it’ and ‘what should be done if the imagined risk eventuates’ (TheOurCommunity Team, p. 2). Typically this will involve collection of information by the designated staff about likely or possible risks with analysis of what level of risk is deemed tolerable and how it should be managed. The outcomes of this assessment process determine the extent of changes needed within the practices or systems of the organisation. As mentioned earlier most government funded organisations within South Australia would have in place these types of risk management practices. The adoption of such practices is grafted on to other managerialist practices instigated over the course of the 1990s, at a time when the impact of neo-liberal policies has cut deep. One consequence of the latter development is that community focused organisations are dealing with much more complex and demanding situations of need (ACOSS 2003).

There has been very little local research on organisational risk management in terms of its implications for practice which aims to ‘strengthen communities’. However anecdotal evidence suggests that as risk management processes are more prominent in the planning and operations of service delivery, they are influencing organisational culture about what is and is not possible and permissible in practice. Overseas literature, including the findings of research studies, presents a picture of risk practices changing the nature of human service organisations in ways that may well be detrimental to the traditional goals of such agencies. Kemshall et al. (1997) argue that risk is increasingly becoming a ‘central organising principle’ in the social services and they link this to accountability requirements and measures to tighten welfare expenditure. Waterson (1999, p. 278) argues that a focus on risk in planning and service delivery is increasingly on ‘negative risk’ supplanting attention to ‘risk taking’ to respond to need and empowerment, and this is problematic. This includes a fixation with ‘scientification’ which maintains that risk management is a neutral or value free undertaking. She makes the point that at every step of the risk management decision-making process value judgements are made about what constitutes a risk and what level of risk is bearable or desirable.

In pursuing her argument Waterson cites examples from the literature where residents may define personal risks quite differently to human service workers, for example, as ‘poor housing, poverty, unemployment’ and ‘wheelchair unfriendly environments’ (1999, p. 277). In unpacking varying perspectives of risk (i.e., groups within ‘community’, ‘clients’, ‘professional experts’ and ‘central agencies’) she raises issues of whose interests are served in the practice of risk management. A pertinent question for the purposes of the argument in this paper, is the extent to which other risks that are the result of past practices and require much longer time frames to respond to, such as a risk of poverty, discrimination and racism and poor quality care, feature in a risk management equation.

Public liability insurance pressures

An externally driven trigger for a rise in risk management within organisations has been public liability insurance. The OurCommunity Team on their website write that ‘the public liability insurance dilemma has caused enormous pain for community organisations’ (www. ourcommunity.com.au). In the 2002 Australians Living on the Edge Survey of 2,638 agencies, ACOSS gathered data about insurance for 2001-2002. Agencies surveyed had a low level of public liability claims one per cent of total claims) and professional indemnity claims (three per cent of total claims) over the preceding two years. Yet as ACOSS reports, a large number had problems in securing insurance (a third of respondents) due in part to increased costs, with 29 per cent of agencies (90 in total) unable to secure insurance (2003, pp. 19-22).

These developments clearly come at a cost. Many smaller community organizations have had to reorient their efforts towards greater fundraising. For example FEAST, the annual South Australian Gay and Lesbian Festival, faced with an increase in public liability insurance of more than 1,000 per cent (FEAST 2003), have engaged in extensive fundraising to meet these costs. In 2003 the SA Community and Neighbourhood Houses Association (CAN) reported in the September SACOSS monthly magazine that some neighbourhood houses are contemplating greatly reduced activities, as locally based management groups are...
having difficulties in raising the funds to pay the increased premiums and have been unable to secure more favourable conditions from insurance firms (SACOSS 2003).

In South Australia there are also numerous examples of community events that have faced the threat of being discontinued or cancelled because of public liability insurance issues. A search of South Australia's only daily newspaper The Advertiser over a two month period in 2002 revealed this was the case for the following community based activities: Semaphore steam train; Marrabel Rodeo; McLaren Vale Bushing Festival; Whyalla Air and Sea Rescue; Glenelg markets. At one level these threats of closure or disruption of community organisations/activities deemed 'risky' have a clear implication for sustaining the community infrastructure that constitutes civil society and generates social capital.

At another level it can be argued that risk management practices have the potential to alter the nature of community infrastructure because they are diverting the attention of these organisations towards meeting the needs and requirements of the 'risk environment'. As well as having to pay more for insurance against risks it has been suggested, by bodies such as the Insurance Council of Australia, that organisations implement risk management strategies (Insurance Council of Australia 2003). A diversion of efforts into even more administrative risk activities diverts resources, time and attention away from effort that will further the values and goals of community orientated organisations.

However, there is a further level at which this redirection of effort is problematic and this is in constraining the ability of organisations to support 'risk taking'. Two advertisements that appeared side-by-side in the South Australian Advertiser in September 2002 vividly capture this dilemma. One advertisement promotes the SA Government's free risk management workshops for community organisations with the words: Managing everyday risks or risks of new activities is an important part of every organisation. Next to this is an advertisement for Edward De Bono lectures, incidentally not free, on the topic of lateral thinking and generating opportunities for imagination and change. This is promoted with the words: Rethink-think and thrive. The difference between brilliant and mediocre thinking lies not so much in our mental equipment as in how well we use it.

The juxtaposition of these images captures a potential clash between unfettered risk management within organisations and a culture that can support community development. In exploring further this argument I focus on three aspects. First, a prevailing view of risk seems to be that it can be objectively known and thus is value free. As overseas writers suggest, this can mask the ways in which the notion of risk is contested (Kemshall et al. 1997; Watson 1999), and the manner in which experts draw on certain knowledge to construct the risk. Wearing and Dowse make a similar point in discussing risk in the context of Australian welfare practice (2000, p 7). Second and related, is that a practice based on fear of 'things going wrong' is contrary to ideas and imagination that inspire critical community development or in other words, risk of the type of 'dare to challenge', 'taking a risk'. Watson reinforces this idea in distinguishing between positive and negative ways to think about risk. Here Beck's (2000) ideas of a 'risk society' or notions of a technologically informed, 'reflexive modernity' are useful in making sense of risk as a construct and of why a constraining interpretation of risk holds sway. In his work, Beck (2000) suggests that risk is a construct that mediates between perceptions of certainty on the one hand and destruction on the other. He writes:

The discourse of risk begins where our trust in our security ends and ceases to be relevant when the potential catastrophe occurs. The concept of risk thus characterises a peculiar, intermediate state between security and destruction, where the perception of threatening risks determines thought and action (Beck 2000, p. 135).

Beck argues that risk is an idea that assists us to fend off possible threats that may lie ahead – litigation, fire, storms, global warming, political upheaval, genetic mutations, SARS, terrorism. He stresses that this construct is a 'might be' or 'may be' and as such it is 'fictitious' (2000, p. 137). However, in conjuring the 'construct', assumptions are made about a reality or what might become real should the actions being undertaken continue in a particular way. Dean (1999, p. 131) in writing on 'risks, calculable and incalculable' echoes this view that: 'There is no such thing as risk in reality. Risk is a way - or rather, a set of different ways - of ordering reality'.

In seeking to manage risk, at work is a belief that offsetting future risks will allow us to deal with the uncertainty and complexity of the now, the present. In a community context organisations undoubtedly do face possible 'terrors' in uncertain times. For example the very real consequences that may arise from unforeseen litigation if someone is harmed whilst engaged in an activity sponsored by the organisation, or if the organisation fails to fulfil contractual obligations. Yet as Beck writes:

Believed risks are the whip used to keep the present day moving along at a
gallop. The more threatening the shadows that fall on the present day from a terrible future looming in the distance, the more compelling the shock that can be provoked by dramatising risk today. (Beck 2000, p. 137)

This view of ‘risk’ based on fear rubs up against ideals of hope about possibilities and courage to challenge and pursue social change in the face of uncertainty. In community development work hope is a driver; that is, the agency of social actors in collective action can make a difference, and we are not just the subjects of wider forces (Ife 1995, p. 276). Indeed as Beck (2000, p. 141) writes: ‘Risks only suggest what should not be done, not what should be done’. Taking a risk for social justice and social change requires an ability to respond organically, which in turn requires ‘organisational room to move’. A strengthening community practice also requires organisations to have some means for navigating the inevitable dilemmas about ‘risk taking’ of the ‘dare to challenge’ sort of risk, when funded by the state.

The extent to which organisations can find a balance is influenced by a number of complex factors at work both within the organisation and in its interactions with the external policy and funding environment (Laris 1992). Alaszewski and Manthorpe (1998) draw attention to some of the possible tensions within organisations that seek to both foster social change goals and also meet requirements to manage risk. They report on an exploratory study of 42 human services agencies in the Yorkshire area in the North of England from which they conclude that there are ‘...variations in the ways in which welfare agencies respond to risk’ (1998, p. 14). These variations are partly explained by the organisational culture and structure, including the dominant decision-making practices. They suggest that how organisational leaders perceived the external environment, for example, whether they saw it as a supportive policy environment, also impacted on how rigidly they applied risk management. In other words, the relation between the workings of the internal environment and interpretations of the external environment are key factors.

Third, a view of risk as embedded in organisational risk management process is a-historical in that the prime reference point for decision-making, or the size of the insurance premium, is a constructed ‘future’ (Beck, 2000). For
example, many of the community organisations facing increased premiums have not had a history of problems such as large claims or payouts. This is illustrative of an absurd response to risk, whether it be through organisational management processes or insurance premiums. This is captured in the following quote from the Report of the Australian Senate Economics Reference Committee on Insurance held in 2002:

The Committee received many submissions from community groups, small businesses, and professional organisations describing sudden, exorbitant increases in premiums (regardless of claims history): inability to find insurance at any price; excesses and deductibles increased to an extent that makes the insured effectively self-insured for all but the biggest risk. Community events are cancelled, community groups are disbanding, professionals find themselves unable to practise their professions (2002, p. 1).

The relation between managing risk and strengthening communities highlights quite starkly the contradiction between prevailing government policy language and what is happening, shaped as it is by processes of capital accumulation and other broader contextual factors. The contradictory nature of communitarian policies is well-established (for example, Mowbray 1985; Bauman, 2000). Questions are therefore raised about the nature of strengthening communities in a climate of public liability insurance and risk. As with notions of risk, a practice to strengthen communities is also based in ‘constructs’ that express preferred ways to what might be real at some time in the future. For example, ideals of hope, principles of participation, social justice and equity are all based on contested knowledge about what may be realised in another time and place. However, a critical community development work requires a considered understanding of how the present has been arrived at in order to challenge and change systems and structures. Again these ideas are not new (Mowbray 1985; Ile 1995) but they are ones that can be usefully recalled to the community work practice arena.

Beck (2000, p. 149) argues that the ‘relations of definition’ are critical in a risk world. This notion, together with the ideas raised by Waterson (1999), point to strategies to deal with organisational risk management which may balance a concern to manage risk but in the process, not draw away from a practice that takes risks to strengthen communities. First, within organisational risk management practices making the values, assumptions and knowledge used to construct the risk assessment explicit may be of value in challenging the ‘objective’ status of a ‘risk’. Including ‘community’ and clients perceptions of risks in risk assessments can assist this process. This strategy is a logical extension of community participation in program planning and evaluation-current community organisation practice. There is also scope in risk assessment process for broadening the definition of risk. For example, switching the predominant definition of ‘what may go wrong’ to the risks that arise from curtailed service provision or activities and the risks of not ‘taking risks’ to respond to injustice and inequity. This would reveal alternative risk management strategies and the resultant actions would be profoundly different. Second, whilst this is a widespread problem that has attracted significant media and political attention there is clearly scope for much more evidence and debate about insurance and risk issues from a community perspective. In particular, there is scope for challenging the nexus between perceptions of community behaviour, the manner of internal organisational risk management and public liability insurance premiums. A current study being conducted in South Australia involving the author and the SA Council Of Social Services will gather evidence about these issues. The study will also canvass from the ‘bottom up’, possible strategies to balance concern for risk as currently enacted with concerns for goals of social justice and equity.

Conclusion

In the contemporary South Australian context a tension is evident in the paradox of organisations simultaneously encouraged and working to strengthen communities and manage risk in the context of rising insurance premiums. Dealing with and negotiating paradoxes has historically been part of the task of ‘community builders’ who seek to change or challenge dominant practices and ideas. Beck (2000, p. 134) suggests in writing about risk societies that a ‘new sociological imagination is needed that is sensitive to the concrete paradoxes and challenges of reflexive modernity’. At one level re-engaging a ‘sociological imagination’ (Mills 1970) and the critical analysis that this implies are ways in which advocates of stronger communities might navigate a ‘risk’ environment and maintain a practice of the ‘take a risk’ nature.

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