



## Understanding Risk in Social Work

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## EDITORIAL

### Understanding Risk in Social Work

Welcome to this special issue of the Journal of Social Work Practice on *risk in social work*. Risk is often defined in terms of the probability of harm occurring (Gigerenzer 2014); although in social work practice, the concept is far more multi-faceted. The profession is concerned with the seriousness of (i.e. negative value placed on) the particular harm as well as its likelihood. When we consider ‘risky situations’ in terms of making decisions, we are often considering both potential gains (with both their value and their likelihood) as well as the possible harms in some way or other (Taylor 2017a). Consideration of future situations raises the complex domain of deciding about preventive actions to reduce the possibility or seriousness of harm. And then there are the emotions such as *wariness of lurking conflict* (Taylor 2006), anxiety, fear and courage – familiar subject matter to readers of this journal – which may be an intrinsic part of such ‘risk work’ within professional practice. To give added complexity, we must consider also the organisational system aspects, such as the assessment and management of risk, which interweaves with the professional tasks (Taylor et al. 2015). Working in ‘risk averse’ organisations and within a wider societal culture of blame are challenges that practitioners must work with everyday (Cooper & Whittaker 2014; Whittaker 2011; Whittaker & Harvard 2016). The study of ‘risk’ in social work is a fundamental topic of interest to this journal, where there is a complex interplay between human behaviour, emotion, evidence of fact, professional values and organisational systems. This special issue includes articles from esteemed social work researchers and theorists from around the globe, writing with a focus on aspects of risk within social work. We are delighted to welcome their contributions!

Eileen Gambrell from the USA writes about: *avoidable ignorance and the ethics of risk in child welfare*. This scholarly piece by a world-renowned social work academic highlights the moral demand for greater openness in providing information to clients about the outcomes of services so that informed choices may be made. The article is based on a systemic view of risk to children and families, and draws links between appraising risk and the use of client decision aids.

The article by Mark Hardy (England) is titled: *in defence of actuarialism: interrogating the logic of risk in social work practice*. He discusses concerns that an emphasis on ‘risk’ in social work might tend to focus on individual pathology and neglect consideration of the social environment. This provides a context for his study of practitioner decision-making which challenged this critique. The study data suggest that sometimes practitioners have greater concerns than the facts warrant. The tendency to ‘risk aversion’ seems to be more a feature of working environments in which fear of blame is a concern, rather than being a function of the use of actuarial assessment tools. Emotion seems to over-ride objective statistical

calculation leading to risk-averse practice. The use of robust assessment tools may provide a necessary check and balance in emotionally demanding work.

Emily Keddell presents the results of a rigorous study set in New Zealand which compares: *risk-averse and risk-friendly practitioners in child welfare decision-making*. Attitudes of practitioners to risk issues were studied using vignettes. The study found that non-governmental social workers were more inclined to be risk-averse by comparison with statutory child welfare workers. Risk-averse practitioners, who rated the severity of the abuse higher than the risk-friendly group, estimated more harm to children over time if there was no intervention even though both groups described the problems experienced by the vignette family using similar constructs and with similar causal explanations of the behaviours. The use of the term 'risk-friendly' in the article acknowledges the negative cultural connotations that can exist around the term 'risk-taking', even whilst professionals acknowledge that risk-aversion may not always be the best decision choice. One conclusion of the study is that practitioners may differ in terms of orientation between a 'developmental-lifespan' focus compared to a 'presenting-welfare-needs' focus, leading to a different conceptualisation and weighting of risk factors.

There are three articles in this issue that focus on emotional aspects of 'risk work' in professional practice. Laura Cook (England) seeks to make sense of initial home visits in terms of: *the role of intuition in child and family social workers' assessments of risk*. Practitioners reported that intuitions during their first encounter with the family were an important source of information for assessment of risk. Emotional responses such as 'niggles' and 'gut feelings' sensitised them to potentially important information before it was processed rationally. The study identifies five heuristics (human judgement shortcuts; see Taylor 2017b) used by social workers to assess risk during the initial encounter, providing a connection between 'risk-work' and professional judgement tasks.

Peter Hall (England) writes on: *Mental Health Act assessments: professional narratives on alternatives to hospital admission*. He draws on interviews with professionals involved with Mental Health Act assessments to illustrate concepts of decision-making, professional boundaries and models of these assessments, which are explored as a means of understanding outcomes to Mental Health Act assessments.

Jane Fenton and Timothy Kelly (Scotland) focus on *social workers' experiences of moral injury* using a concept developed to refer to shame and guilt disturbances experienced by combat veterans, manifesting with some of the symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder. Their study found that the more risk averse an agency is, the more ethical stress was experienced by workers. Qualitative data from the study is integrated with concepts of 'moral injury' in terms of situations where social workers perpetrate, fail to prevent or witness acts that contravene their moral code. They propose that for social workers to operate in a healthy and service-user-driven manner, they must retain the ability and flexibility to engage in reflection and responsive practice.

Although many of the issues facing social workers have been broadly similar for decades, the next article – by Tony Stanley, Surinder Guru and Vicki Coppock (England) – illustrates a modern challenge: the role of social workers in relation to: 'counter-radicalisation networks'. The context is new statutory responsibilities placed on professionals in England to pay: 'due regard to preventing terrorism'.

This duty seems to have contributed to a shifting of social work practice and decision-making from the fields of advocacy and promotion of ethics, justice and human rights, towards risk work more analogous to that of security services. Based on case study material, the article discusses issues for social workers engaged in anticipatory risk work, working in a pre-crime space in an effort to prevent terrorist atrocities.

The final article in this issue is by Alessandro Sicora from Italy. Alessandro focuses on: *reflective practice, risk and mistakes in social work*. His paper develops further some risk concepts outlined in his recent book (Sicora 2017). He highlights a wide range of aspects from the emotional experience of 'being wrong' to organisational systems for error prevention and for highlighting latent errors. He proposes that 'reasonable' professional decision-making can be developed through appropriate reflective practice opportunities. This provides a positive and hopeful complement to articles that necessarily deal with the many difficult and painful issues of possible harm to people that we conceptualise as 'risk'.

These articles present a welcome and interesting range of study findings and perspectives on risk in social work. However, the topic of 'risk' in social work requires further development, despite the proliferation of sociological literature on the one hand, and the organisation material on 'managing risks' on the other. Our own professional social work approach to risk is only slowly emerging, through ideas in articles such as these. Our challenge is to integrate useful ideas from other fields – including communication studies, health care, law, military studies, organisational science, psychology and sociology – and develop our own conceptualisation suited to our professional role.

When the call went out for this special issue, abstracts were invited that related to both decision-making and risk. In the event, the number of high-quality abstracts received was such that the journal editors decided to allow two special issues: this one focusing more on risk, and one next year focusing on professional judgement and decision-making. So, journal readers have a second special issue to look forward to! However, the topics of risk and decision-making are closely linked such that both special issues will have relevance to both topics to some extent.

One reason for the strong response to the abstract call is key networks that are growing on this topic area. Firstly, the *Decisions, Assessment, Risk and Evidence in Social Work* (DARE) biennial conference near Belfast, Northern Ireland has now been running since 2010 ([www.ulster.ac.uk/dare](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/dare)). The last (2016) conference attracted over 120 participants from 12 countries; the next conference is planned for July 2018. Secondly, the *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* (DARSIG) of the *European Social Work Research Association* (ESWRA) (Taylor & Sharland 2015) was formed in 2014 (Taylor et al. *in press*). DARSIG is in its early stages of development, but already includes over 30 members from about 15 countries. Some key areas for research and development on risk in social work have been identified by the group, including: the influence of organisational and national cultures on understandings of 'risk'; the place of consequences as well as likelihoods in judging risk; models of how potential benefits are weighed against possible harm; how 'big data' might inform our understanding of risk factors; linking risk with strengths and mitigating factors; risk within social work assessment; the interface between risk and preventive services; and developing effective methods

of communicating risk with numbers, words or visual means. Readers interested in the topic of risk in social work are warmly invited, of course, to attend the DARE conference or to join DARSIG through the ESWRA website (<http://www.eswra.org/>).

If you are pursuing research, teaching or development of management or practice on some dimension of risk in social work, we would like to encourage you in your endeavours. But even if your interest is limited to reading this journal, we hope that you enjoy these stimulating articles.

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Andrew Whittaker

*Associate Professor of Social Work, London South Bank University*

Brian Taylor

*Professor of Social Work, Ulster University, Northern Ireland*