Risk, Decision-making and Assessment in Child Welfare

According to the sociologist Anthony Giddens, we live in a society preoccupied with the future and with safety, thus emphasising the notion of *'risk'*. So much so in fact, that the concept of risk now appears as a pervasive and seemingly inescapable reality of contemporary life, becoming one of the essential topographies associated with modernity. Risks to health, safety and the environment abound and the notion of risk and risk taking are increasingly preoccupying individuals, governments, organisations and scholars. A plethora of different fields, from business and engineering, to health and social care and education, are currently fixated with assessing, discussing, or preventing a wide variety of risks.

Whether it's work-related or about health, education, family, business, or more personal matters, each and every one of us will, to some extent, be confronted with risk situations. We will be required to make decisions about the likelihood or not of a future event occurring if we decide to take a particular course of action. Decisions such as this may be viewed as involving weighing the potential gains against possible losses incurred before deciding whether the risk is worth taking. Before action is taken to manage, mitigate, reduce or eliminate risk, decisions must be taken about which potential gains are important and which possible harms will be ignored. However, the term 'risk' has no consistent definition, yet it is frequently used. What is a risk? Who is at risk? What are they at risk of? Why are they at risk, and who says they are at risk?

This invariably presents the decision maker with a problem, since deciding necessitates a level of extrapolation from current events to help calculate future outcomes: and who can predict the future with accuracy? For example, a teenager knows that she will be grounded if she chooses to invite friends over after school instead of doing her homework, but also knows that the likelihood of her parents finding out she did so is slight. If the teenager chooses to invite her friends over, she is taking a risk of getting in trouble with her parents.

For professionals working with children, these issues are arguably magnified somewhat, given society's unceasing desire to protect children from harm. Inevitably, this can present workers with certain complicated ontological and practical challenges. For example, some would argue that all children are at risk in some way or another, while others emphasise that some children face much higher risks than do other children. Additionally, in making decisions regarding risk associated with working with, or caring for, children, workers are at times expected to navigate their way through a multifarious legal, theoretical, practical and procedural landscape and at the same time deal with the emotive and elusive nature of risk itself. This complexity does not lend itself to simple linear solutions. Instead, the professional is expected to make judgements and decisions about risk, based on the assessment of a variety of factors that help provide some information about 'the level of risk'. This can be a challenge, as often impenetrable contextual conditions exist which place boundaries on the extent to which rational judgement can be practised (Gambrill, 2012).

There are many questions, such as: 'how do you decide? ...If you form your own judgement, how do you explain or justify your opinion? ...To what extent are your judgements based on an awareness (more or less conscious) *of what might happen if* ...?' (Taylor, 2017: 92). Michael Gove's now infamous statement: 'Britain has had enough of experts' (Sky News, 2016) testifies to the questioning of professional judgement in 'Western' society which is now common. It has become increasingly important for professionals to be able to articulate the basis for their judgements and to explain their decisions. Systems, such as assessment tools, to support assessment of risk are used increasingly in family and child care work.

The variety of approaches to assessment of 'risky' situations, requires professionals to undertake tasks such as: (i), identify hazards and risk factors that have the potential to cause harm (hazard identification), (ii,) analyse and evaluate the risk associated with that hazard (risk analysis, and risk evaluation) and (iii), determine appropriate ways to eliminate the hazard, or control the risk when the hazard cannot be eliminated (risk control).

Yet is it not the case that children must be allowed, and indeed encouraged to take risks at times, unencumbered by professional angst? How else would they evolve into alert adults, capable of discovering what the world has to offer? But how does society manage the challenge of encouraging children to learn from life, and at the same time keep children safe in a world that we know can be harmful? How can we successfully understand risk, make informed assessments and take decisions that enable children to lead rewarding lives that are at once happy, fulfilling and safe? This question and others, are worth exploring further from a multidisciplinary perspective to understand the breadth of issues involved.

For these reasons, we we are delighted to have a wide range of topics and authors from different backgrounds contributing to this Special Edition of Child Care in Practice about risk, assessment and decision making. The articles are sequenced, broadly, along a general continuum from the process of understanding the (risk) context; cognitive tasks of forming a judgement; assessment tools and processes; and decision supports and processes.

In our first article, Sanseter and colleagues examine risk aversive perceptions and practices among early childhood education and care institutions in five countries (Greece, Portugal, Estonia, Croatia and Norway). They examine the factors that practitioners and parents experience as barriers for children's outdoor play, especially those associated with risk. The team concludes that practitioner's and parent's negative perceptions of risk have proven to be an important reason for the decline of young children's opportunities for outdoor play.

In our second article, Søbjerg and colleagues working in Denmark, examine the decision making process at the point when referrals are made to child welfare agencies. This article presents an empirical study of 511 referrals received by two local authorities in Denmark. The study investigates the information presented in the referrals in order to get an understanding of what child protection case workers must work with when assessing the risk of children referred to child welfare services. The content of referrals shows differences in perceptions of risk depending on professional backgrounds. Based on the findings, Søbjerg and colleagues develop and explore five hypotheses about how and why referrals are made.

In our third article, McCormack and colleagues explore the factors that influenced team leader decision-making processes about pathways for duty (intake) referrals in a Republic of Ireland child welfare agency. Using an ecological perspective, their findings show the significance of individual factors that influenced decision making, such as professional judgement, skills, knowledge and experience. Other factors, such as new procedures, the legislative context and practices to aid decision making in assessment, were also identified as influential factors in how decisions were made. They discuss the implications for practice of these various factors.

Our fourth article by McConnell et al., examines the lessons learned from a feasibility study,established to examine the efficacy of an assessment process to determine couples' suitability for undertaking a couples-based intervention programme for domestic abuse. Study findings provided learning about the acceptability of the measures and screening tools to both couples and practitioners, and how the implementation of the assessment could be improved. The article provides a useful building-block for our knowledge base.

Our fifth article offers a new conceptualisation of sensemaking in social work assessment. In this article, Cook and Gregory argue that while there has been interest in how social workers assess risk to children, a crucial issue is the '*sensemaking*' process that occurs before a decision. Drawing on research on assessment and theoretical literature from the fields of psychology and organisational studies, this article offers a view of sensemaking through three lenses, which are explored in-depth. Drawing together key features from these perspectives, the authors advance six propositions about sensemaking in child and family assessment, concluding with the implications of this conceptualisation for child and family assessment.

Wilkins and Forrester ask: 'can you predict the future?' In their article, they explore the area of prediction, exploring if it is possible to improve social work forecasts about the future. This paper considers key philosophical issues in theorizing prediction in social work, including conceptions of risk, free will and self-determination. The article then turns to practical issues, such as the relationship between forecasting and decision making, and considers possible research methods and issues associated with them. Wilkins and Forrester describe how they have started to explore the face-validity of this approach with social workers and discuss how they have measured the accuracy of forecasting in social work.

In our last article, Monson examines risk attitudes within 'complex youth' assessment and decision making from the perspectives of a variety of professionals in the Republic of Ireland. The findings from Monson's study suggest that a negative discourse of risk dominates across the professional disciplines studied. Monson found that the focus of professionals' work is about managing 'risk', rather than on addressing 'need'. This narrative Monson argues, leads to 'complex youth' either not receiving a service or receiving a service that is unsuitable. Recommendations for practice are explored that focus on developing mechanisms to facilitate reflexivity by the practitioner, within the workplace and within collaborative multi-agency settings, in order to develop constructive practice approaches.

We hope you enjoy this collection of inspiring articles on assessment, risk and decision making. The articles cover a range of interesting and important issues that are truly pan-European in nature. They represent the diverse issues that professionals have to consider in contemporary practice. We hope that this Special Edition will provoke discussion amongst professionals.

This Special Edition is designed to strengthen the growing networks set up to stimulate academic, researcher and practitioner collaboration, with the aim of increasing our understanding of issues of assessment, risk and decision making. Specifically we would like to draw your attention to:

- the *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* (DARSIG) (https://www.eswra.org/decisions_sig) of the European Social Work Research Association, which will be hosting events at the 10th European Conference for Social Work Research, 22nd – 24th April 2020 in Bucharest, Rumania (https://www.eswra.org/).
- the *Decisions, Assessment, Risk and Evidence in Social Work* (DARE) 6th Biennial International Symposium, 30th June - 1st July 2020 at the Dunadry Hotel, Antrim, Northern Ireland (https://www.ulster.ac.uk/conference/dare) which is expected to bring together about 150 researchers, educators, policy makers, managers and senior practitioners from around the world to share developments on these specific topics.

We look forward to the possibility of meeting up with you at one of these events in the coming year or on some future occasion!

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References
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