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Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato



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Exploring hesitancy in professional decision making around children & young people at risk: **Managing apprehension.**

Kelly Smith (*University of Waikato*)

Deb Stanfield (*Wintec*)

(presentation to year 3 Wintec social work students 30 August 2013)

Children in Crisis Conference

Learning Goals for today

- Apply theoretical knowledge that describes and explains the complex phenomenon of RISK.
- Understand meaning of RISK and RISK AVERSION; discuss risk aversion in the context of a 'professional threat,' and implications of risk aversion in policy.
- Understand the contexts of risk in social work practice (risk assessment/management, professional risk, organizational risk, history of risk, language of risk.)



SOCIAL WORKER
WHO TAKES CHILD
FROM FAMILY



SOCIAL WORKER
WHO LEAVES ABUSED CHILD
WITH FAMILY

Doel & Shardlow (2005, p.204)

Defining Children at Risk,

The phrase **“at risk”** is used to signify that a child **is exposed to some source of harm** and that possibly **some protective measures** need to be taken.

(Pierson and Thomas, 2010)

History of Risk (Green, 2007)

- Pre-industrial, traditional societies perceived hazards, disasters to be random, unpredictable unpreventable and uncontrollable – uncertainty was a feature of life. (fate) (shit happens)
- Movement into capitalism, market risk, idea that there is some control over the future, scientific understandings of cause and effect (global warming, disease) and ability to respond and control. (produces risk consciousness)
- Individualism – moving away from collective management of risk (religious ideas, values of social class, customs etc) to freedom of choice, individual freedom correlated with personal responsibility for outcomes (eg scientists in Italy being criminalised for not predicting earthquake)

When you think about risk what thoughts/concepts come to mind?

- **What is risk?**
- **What are the different kinds/categories of risk?**
- **What are the characteristics of risk?**

What are the different kinds/categories of risk?

- Risk of progression of illness – risk to health of the individual
 - Risk of deliberately induced harm to self including suicide
 - Risk of unintentional harm to self, or exploitation
 - Risk of intentional or unintentional violence, or fear-inducing behaviour towards others
- (Ministry of Health 1998, p 2)*

What are the characteristics of risk?

- Risk fluctuates and isn't static,
- assessment/prediction is more accurate in the short term,
- there are critical points in the management of risk,
- the most important way to minimise risk is good clinical management, reliance upon actuarial factors alone is unwise.

(Ministry of Health 1998, p 3)

- **A child at risk** is regarded as vulnerable to physical or sexual abuse by one or more people, or to other sources of harm through parental neglect.

➤ ***What is rarely stated is the probability that the child will suffer some harm.***

(Pierson & Thomas 2010 p. 451).

- **Risk taking** according to Carson and Bain (2008) can be:
 - an occasion when one or more consequences (events, outcomes and so on) could occur. Critically those consequences may be harmful and/or beneficial **and**
 - either the number and/or the extent of those consequences, and/or their likelihood, is uncertain and/or unknown (p.242)

The Risk Discourse Continuum: Certainty to Uncertainty

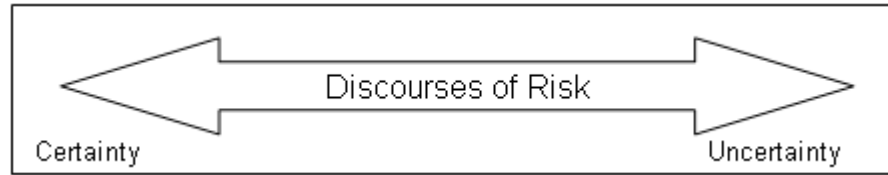


Figure 1. The risk discourse continuum: Certainty to Uncertainty. From "Risky Work: Child protection practice," by T. Stanley, 2007.

Last 30 years characterised by three risk periods.

1. **1970's** – Growing perception of children being seen 'at risk'. Social workers increasingly expected to identify risk factors
2. **1980's -1990's** – Development of formal risk assessment tools and policies. Proceduralised models of practice introduced to help manage uncertainties that exist within risk assessments. Procedures monitored and audited, but masked unpredictable and uncertain parts of child protection assessment work (Parton, cited in Stanley, 2007).
3. **'Period of legitimacy'** – discourses on risk used to legitimise assessment decisions. Participation in assessment between social workers and families is inhibited due to insistence on 'objective facts'. Social workers seeking evidence and proof about level of risk, less room for subjectivity and may compromise relationships.

Risk Factors and Protective Factors

Professionals working with children need to be able to identify **potential risk factors** alongside **protective factors** that might offset the risk of harm or provide opportunities for growth

(Hothersall & Maas-Lowit, 2010)

Identification of risk

- What would you consider as negative events or behaviours associated with children under 12 year?
- What would you consider as negative events or behaviours associated with youth?
- What would you consider to be protective factors, that promote resilience?

Source of need in relation to children

Some children are unable to get their basic needs met and therefore are under threat

- it is their parents or caregivers who are expected to met these needs?
- If the parent/caregiver can't or won't provide for or protect then the child is **at risk of harm** and would therefore be in need of protection

Categories of risk

One way of analysing risk is to separate risk into **two categories**:

1. Those risks which people *pose to others*
2. Those risks to which *people are exposed*, these are perhaps the best understood as referring to people who are **vulnerable to risk**

Kemshall, 2002, p. 124

Vulnerability

Vulnerability is a **risk related concept**.

- Families are often vulnerable because they are exposed to bad consequences and have little power to control their circumstances.
- Families can be vulnerable for physical, psychological and social reasons.

A child who is vulnerable for-

- **physical reasons** is likely to be physically abused,
- **psychological vulnerability** is often related to damaging influences in a child's early years (a child who has been abused, children in care),
- **social vulnerability** relates to poor housing, poverty, unemployment, at risk communities and these factors are known to increase the risk of delinquency, mental illness and dysfunction (Brearley, 1982).

Vulnerable groups

With vulnerable groups it is possible to envisage an **negative outcome** through critical reasoning, statistical measures and from explanatory models.

- Groups of people that are exposed to specific hazards are **labelled vulnerable** due to the fact that individuals within the group are more likely to experience an **adverse event**.

(Brearley, 1982).

Causal links between poverty and child maltreatment

Drucker (1997, as cited in O'Brien, 2011, p. 109)

- *“over the last 25 years nearly all studies of poverty have noted the correlation between poverty and child abuse. Although child abuse is not caused by poverty, it seems to be intricately linked.*
- *Clinical studies of child abuse and neglect have shown that poor families are more likely than those with more economic resources to be identified and labelled as maltreating”.*
- O'Brien (2011) asserts that the focus in NZ has often been on issues of ethnicity but as UNICEF (2003b, p.13) report observes “it seems likely that the operative factor is not ethnicity but poverty (*which disproportionately affects ethnic minority families*)”

Poverty and Violence

Mike O'Brien (2011, p.108) states

- That international research evidence is very clear that **there is a link between poverty and child abuse.**
 - However the nature of the link is unclear, but poverty is also associated with a range of other risk factors such as; *poor housing, unemployment, mental health issues, social exclusion*
- Improving lives of families and children by reducing poverty will have an effect on childhood experiences of abuse, violence and neglect.

Perceptions of Risk

By allowing social workers to engage families in a discussion about their perceptions of risk it becomes more possible to explore how concerning behaviours and actions in a family can be managed and reduced, to build safety for their children and young people, their older family member, and indeed anyone termed 'at risk' or potentially posing a risk' (Stanley, 2010 p.43).

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