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Risk at the Boundaries of Social Work: An Editorial

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Abstract

In this editorial we introduce a special thematic collection of articles which focus on how risk operates, or is conceptualised, at the boundaries of social work practice. The collection includes theoretical, empirical, and practice-oriented articles, each of which critically engages with contemporary debates about risk and social work and its complex intersections with boundary making in diverse fields. These fields include social work with older people, child sexual abuse and exploitation, and people with learning disabilities. We begin the editorial with a brief account of how social work can be defined and the competing ideological traditions that underpin differing forms of social work in practice, policy, and research. We also point to the contrasting nature of risk studies in relation to social work, ranging from the pragmatic concern with measuring and managing risk, to critical analysis of how and why risk is conceptualised and socially constructed in particular ways. We provide an overview of each of the five articles that comprise the special issue, their intersecting themes, and how they animate in different ways the idea of boundaries and boundary making. In the final section of the editorial, we consider the possibilities for the future direction of theoretical and empirical work in this field.

Keywords: Risk, social work, decision-making, child protection, adult protection.

Introduction

We are pleased to introduce this special issue of *Health, Risk & Society* focussing on Risk at the Boundaries of Social Work. Whilst the title of *Health, Risk & Society* suggests a narrower focus on issues related to health, the journal has a long history of publishing critical social work research. As social work academics and board members of the journal, we were aware it had never hosted a special issue focussing specifically on social work and felt that this was a missed opportunity.

We find it helpful to clarify the focus of the special issue in terms of how social work can be defined. Rode argues that defining social work is a “never-ending story” (Rode, 2017, p. 64), and that the profession and scientific discipline can be organised into three broad categories: helping people affected by social problems; inducing social change to improve these problems; and, thirdly, alleviating oppression and “improving one’s every day” (p.73). One or more of these broad categories might apply to social work as it is practised in a wide range of contexts and settings. However, it is important to recognise that there has been a longstanding tension between two contrasting ideological traditions in social work, and elements of these continue to be reflected in contemporary orientations, both in practice, policy and elsewhere: on the one hand, there is a social work that is concerned with the promotion of professionalism and technical competence; a focus on the family as a social unit and the individualisation of social problems, including poverty as reflecting ‘moral character’. This conceptualisation of social work is dominant in state organised welfare in most of northern Europe and North America. In contrast, and originally embodied by Jane Addams and the Settlement House Movement, there is a social work that has resisted professionalisation, focusing instead on community, class relations and the labour movement, human rights, social justice, and structural causes of poverty and other inequalities (for an in-depth review of the historical tensions, see Franklin, 1986; Thompson *et al*, 2019). The latter ideological orientation is mirrored in the global definition of social work, as formulated by the International Federation of Social Workers (2022) and in various third sector organisations, as well as in the social work

academic community. These contrasting ideological positions are reflected in many studies of risk within social work.

As Kemshall and colleagues noted in their seminal paper over 20 years ago, risk management, risk assessment, the monitoring of risk and risk-taking have become the *raison d'être* of social services agencies (Kemshall, *et al* 1997). This special issue builds on a previous special issue on risk and social work published in the *British Journal of Social Work* in 2010, edited by Jo Warner and Elaine Sharland. In their editorial, Warner and Sharland (2010, p. 1036) argued that intellectual developments around risk in the social work literature had tended to occur outside the mainstream 'risk studies' literature, meaning that, "the field of risk and social work...[had] been largely an 'in-house' affair". They also noted that whilst sociological interests in medicine and healthcare were well established, there was "comparatively little sociological interest either in social work broadly, or in risk and social work specifically" (*Ibid.*, p. 1036). Things have moved on since this publication, however, with many of the articles in that issue now highly cited.

Within the rapidly expanding social work literature on the topic of risk, three broad themes can be identified. First, in pragmatic approaches to risk, the focus has been on the relative strengths and weaknesses of a range of different risk instruments and the purposes to which they can be applied. These purposes include, for example, assessing the likelihood of childhood mistreatment (Assink *et al.*, 2019; van der Put, Assink, & van Solinge, 2017), re-offending (Gottfreson & Moriarty, 2006), and sharing risk decision making with clients (Taylor & McKeown, 2013).

Second is the literature in which the concept of risk receives more critical attention. Risk is understood in these studies as a potentially harmful welfare planning logic that has become dominant in an era of shrinking state funding and the devolving of state welfare practices. Responsibility and capacity for managing the burden of risks is displaced away from the welfare state and onto the individual (Green, 2007; Kemshall, 2013; Webb, 2006). In the wake of such shifts, the moral values of social work, namely, trust, empowerment and respect have been undermined (Broadhurst *et al*, 2010).

A third theme in the literature pertains to the exploration of how social workers negotiate the concept of risk 'on the ground' (Beddoe & Cree, 2017; Chivers, 2018; Featherstone, *et al*, 2018; Hardy, 2014; Mitchell & Demir, 2021; Parton, 2019). In line with the risk-work literature (Brown & Gale, 2018; Gale, *et al*, 2016), this work has shown that whilst the logics of risk may be dominant within policy, social workers may interpret and enact concepts of risk in different ways.

As we highlight below, the articles that comprise this special issue sit most comfortably within the latter two thematic traditions in the risk literature. This reflects *Health, Risk and Society's* emphasis on social processes and the journal's aim of stimulating critical debate about the role of risk in society.

The Special Issue: Social work at the boundaries

Existing literature on risk and social work has provided important insights into the way in which risk is framed and deployed within different social work settings. However, whilst a focus on the ways social workers manage risk is important, this only tells part of the story. Social workers are compelled to work with a range of other professionals and within services which are distributed across the state and non-state sectors. Consequently, risk decisions are rarely made unilaterally, and draw on the logics of multiple stakeholders in fields such as health, mental health, the criminal justice system and educational settings. The practices of social work can thus be understood as operating within, or engaging with, the boundaries of

multiple systems, logics, and types of professional knowledge. Consequently, the issue of boundaries becomes focal to the way that risk is understood.

The term boundary work was first used by the sociologist T.F. Gieryn (1983) who argued that boundaries might be used to achieve professional advantage, through claiming authority over another group's domain or through justifying the monopolisation of an area of practice. Whilst Gieryn's work focussed on competition between professional groups, subsequent literature has also focussed on the fluid or flexible nature of professional boundary work. As editors, we wanted to explore how the concept of boundary work or boundary making in social work intersects with the discursive practices of risk assessment, prevention and intervention of other professionals or areas.

Boundary making can be both a source of practice innovation and a collaboration that affects new knowledge and practice landscapes (Langley et al., 2019). It can also be a source of tension or epistemological confusion as new disciplinary or professional logics gain ascendancy in fields of practice. The articles in this special issue collection interpret professional boundary work in similar ways, by drawing attention to how social workers in fields such as elder care and child protection navigate risk prevention and seek to manage differing professional knowledge formation and intervention frameworks. One particular theme that we noted in our review of the articles concerns the different mechanisms by which the legal/criminal domain is brought into play. This theme highlights the tendency for legal and criminal systems to become influential within social work and for these tendencies to heighten rather than diminish the vulnerability of the particular groups who social workers are trying to help.

In their article *'Interrogating the deployment of 'risk' and 'vulnerability' in the context of early intervention initiatives to prevent child sexual exploitation'*, Mythen and Weston (2023 – this issue) hone in on practitioners' use of risk and vulnerability discourses in multi-agency team environments where they are charged with the prevention of child sexual exploitation (CES). The authors argue that practitioners' safeguarding work is increasingly structured according to the logic of pre-crime securitization and social control which results in epistemological confusion and a propensity to embrace a "hyper-cautious approach" towards CES prevention. Weston and Mythen point to social workers' conflation or blurring of the definitional boundaries between risk and vulnerability as a symptom of the increasing "mission creep" of criminal justice logics in CES prevention practices. These shifting ideological contexts of safeguarding work were also productive of practitioners' paradoxical reliance on narratives of both the universality and particularities of youth vulnerability amid the identification and assessment of risk. While the practitioners interviewed often pointed to the contextual factors rooting risk behaviours and propensities to be harmed, there was nevertheless a tendency for them to generalise the risk of CSE to all young people. Threat, in other words, was understood to be pervasive and global, especially when assessing young peoples' vulnerability in on-line worlds. As the authors note, the over-generalisation of vulnerability can have a two-fold effect: It can obfuscate the need for a robust structural analysis to assess the specificities of contributing factors. Conversely, the globalisation of harm (in its conflation with risk) may lead to unwarranted increases in measures of securitisation, surveillance and social control which, as research demonstrates, often has differential and detrimental impacts on economically and socially marginalised young people and their families, and can in turn promote victim blaming.

Similarly, In their article *'How shall we handle this situation? Social workers' discussions on risks during the Covid-19 pandemic in Swedish elder care'*, Österholm, Olaison and Taghizadeh Larsson (2023 – this issue) provide a rare insight into the everyday work of professionals in elder care services as they negotiate decisions about risk arising during the pandemic. One theme that emerges in their analysis is the question of interprofessional boundaries, such as those between health and

social care professionals, and the way the conventional boundaries that delineate professional responsibilities appeared to be disrupted during the pandemic. As the authors argue, tensions arose in social workers relational caring and risk work with vulnerable service users in elder care services during the pandemic. According to the research findings, professionals reported the complexities of negotiating the risk of contagion when meeting older vulnerable service users in-person, whilst, simultaneously, finding ways to manage the risk to service users posed by unmet care needs that resulted from their handling of contagion. Social workers felt the pandemic's disruptive force in reordering previously settled relational boundaries, with these dictating how they interacted with and cared for service users.

Articles in the special issue also identify the ways in which boundaries can be conceptualised outside of professional or disciplinary divides. The studies often noted that the changing contexts of social work have led to boundaries being (re)made. In their article, *'Managing risk: social workers' intervention strategies in cases of domestic abuse against people with learning disabilities'*, Robb and McCarthy (2023 – this issue) argue that the impact of the Care Act 2014 in England has meant that social workers have had to relearn how to manage domestic abuse risks. Tensions arise due to the need to balance conceptions of adults with learning disabilities as both vulnerable subjects predisposed to risks of being abused and as rational actors having capacity to decide what interventions are necessary to protect themselves from harm. One of the key “knowledge practice” strategies that workers have used to manage these tensions is to individualise risk management through their exercise of legal control over the client, which was viewed by the practitioners in the study as a necessary professional duty. Robb and McCarthy also point to the building of “rapport and trust” and the process of supporting, or at times influencing, the adult with disabilities’ autonomous decision-making. These could become two additional key strategies that social workers deployed to manage risk responsiveness practices in household contexts where abuse was likely or suspected.

The impact of legal frameworks is also examined by Mooney (2023 – this issue) in his article *'Personal Narratives, Public Risk: Using Foucault's 'Confessional' to Examine Adult Retrospective Disclosures of Childhood Abuse'*. Mooney draws on Foucault's concept of the confessional to consider how the boundaries of social work practice with adults are being redrawn by law and policies relating to retrospective disclosures of child abuse in Ireland. The concept of the confessional was used by Foucault to trace the changing nature of state regulation into 'private lives'. Mooney argues that the confessional reflects the process of retrospective disclosures under existing policies, through which adults who have been abused as children are encouraged to disclose past abuse to protect children from harm. Under this new regime, social work's traditional focus on the therapeutic needs of the adult subject who have disclosed abuse is challenged and forensic and legal concerns for children deemed to be at risk predominate. There are consequences to this shifting nature of service-user-worker relational boundaries. On the one hand, the traditional boundary between service-users and social worker seemingly remains, which Mooney argues may be bridged through therapeutic or person-centred work. On the other hand, there is a widening of the boundaries of relational practice to include at risk subjects unknown to the practitioner. This shifted boundary threatens to undermine the therapeutic attention that care workers can offer to the adult service user.

'Making sense of risk: social work at the boundary between care and control' by Alafandari and colleagues (2023 – this issue), continues this exploration of how social workers are navigating differing categories of risk in different international contexts. The article offers a historical overview of the developments in of boundary making and risk practices over the last 25 years, since the publication of Kemshall and colleagues' (Kemshall et al., 1997) seminal article. The authors map the shifting terrain of care and control boundaries in the fields of child and family social work, adult care services, mental health social work and criminal justice social work. Boundaries, for these authors

are, “anything that helps to differentiate you from someone else, or shows where you begin and end” (Cloud & Townsend, 1992, p. 35). As Alafandari and colleagues argue, in applying this concept to behaviour rather than to people and their personal space, the conceptual ‘boundary’ of concern to social workers in these contexts is the point at which the more usual ‘caring’ role must be replaced or complemented by some measure of ‘control’ against some person’s wishes. The authors provide a range of examples, such as, “in some child protection cases; some situations where a person is suicidal; some situations of vulnerable adults at risk of abuse or neglect; and the continuing balance between support and control for social workers supporting offenders to re-engage effectively with society”. In turn, tendencies towards control may have detrimental effects on the social relations and trust necessary for caring roles to be successfully carried out.

Future directions

We hope that this special issue’s focus on the professional practices of social work at the boundaries of risk has illuminated that social work’s story is indeed constantly being rewritten and reinterpreted (Rode, 2017). Alafandari and colleagues (2023 – this issue) helpfully cast their gaze backwards to an assessment of social work’s relationship between boundary making and risk governance over the past 25 years. Other authors in this collection continue the story by highlighting the different social, contextual and legal processes that are currently shaping social work practices. We would like to conclude this special issue by casting our eye forward to the future. Several lines of inquiry for future theoretical and empirical work can be identified in the light of the studies included in this issue.

First, there is scope to explore the effects that new professional boundaries and uncertainties have on the mental and emotional health and wellbeing of social workers. Future research might also flesh out the strategies that practitioners use to manage or alleviate their responses to risk work in contexts of uncertainty, and the (un)intended consequences of these strategies. A related domain explored by a few authors in this collection but that invites further inquiry is a critical analysis of how multi-disciplinary deliberations and strategic decision-making in different health and social service services reformulate understandings and practices of risk.

A second opportunity for future research might focus on changes in social workers’ risk practices in the wake of big data or advancements in communications technologies. This might explore how large data archives and predictive analytics are increasingly used to inform practice. For example, in the United States, predictive analytics are currently being used by regional or state child welfare agencies in 11 states to predict the odds that a child will be mistreated or harmed in the future (Samant, Horowitz, Beiers, & Xu, 2021). Courses of intervention are being determined by algorithmically generated risk scores based on a series of risk predictors of neglect or abuse. Although these tools have been criticised for harbouring social, racial and class biases, 15 other states are also considering their use (Samant, Horowitz, Beiers, & Xu, 2021). Questions arise as to how practitioners are navigating these systems, the strategies they are using to safeguard marginalised communities, and any alternative metrics or logics being deployed to assess or manage risk alongside the algorithms.

Third, since the Covid-19 pandemic, numerous social and health agencies have increased their use of tele-communications technologies (such as call centres or use of communications software such as zoom or snapchat to deliver vital services to individuals and communities in need). There are opportunities to critically examine how conceptualisations of risk and vulnerability have shifted in this move to on-line work where professionals are using technology to determine pathways of assessment and intervention. Ósterholm and colleagues (2022 – this issue) provide some insights into the social dynamics and limitations around these technologies but there is great scope for further research in this area, not least in social work practice within rural communities.

To conclude, we hope that the articles included in this special issue provide much that is of interest both to critical social scientists interested in risk and uncertainty, and to social workers keen to critically reflect on current and emerging practices. We are confident that these studies make significant contributions to social work's critical engagement with risk and that they are helpful in charting the new boundaries and territories that social workers are increasingly obliged to navigate.

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