European Social Work Research Association SIG to study Decisions, Assessment and Risk

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Accepted by the Journal of Evidence-Informed Social Work, 16th October.

Published online: 13 Dec 2017

<https://doi.org/10.1080/23761407.2017.1394244>

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**Abstract**

*Purpose*

The increasing interest in professional judgement and decision making is often separate from the discourse about ‘risk’, and the time-honoured focus on assessment.

*Method*

The need to develop research in and between these topics was recognised in the founding of a *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* (DARSIG) by the *European Social Work Research Association* in 2014.

*Results*

The Group’s interests include cognitive judgements; decision processes with clients, families and other stakeholders; assessment tools and processes; the assessment, communication and management of risk; and legal, ethical and emotional aspects. This article outlines the founding and scope of DARSIG; gives a brief overview of key dimensions of decision making, assessment and risk,and their connections; and highlights research priorities for the future.

*Discussion*

Professional knowledge about decision making, assessment and risk complements knowledge about effectiveness of interventions.

*Conclusion*

DARSIG promises to be an effective mechanism for the purpose.

*Keywords:* Assessment, decision making, evidence-informed practice, professional judgement, research, risk.

**Introduction**

Professional judgement and decision-making are recognised increasingly as central components of social work practice. Social workers contribute to life-changing decisions for clients and families. These decisions normally take place following or as part of assessment processes. Social work assessments are increasingly expected to incorporate ‘risk’ of possible future harm, not just to assess presenting need. These linked elements of *decision making*, *assessment*, and *risk* require robust research to underpin the development of knowledge, skills, tools, systems and training for the profession. Knowledge of the effectiveness of interventions is essential, but so too is complementary knowledge to inform processes of undertaking assessment and decision making in a context of risk (Mullen, 2016; van de Luitgaarden, 2009).

European Conferences on Social Work Research (ECSWRs) began in 2011 and led to the formal founding of the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) in 2014 (Taylor and Sharland, 2015). In the same year that ESWRA was legally established, the first Special Interest Groups (SIGs) were established. One of these - the *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* (DARSIG) – focuses on research on these linked topics of professional judgement and decision processes; assessment processes, systems and tools; and the assessment, communication and management of risk.

This article – by authors from across Europe - outlines the formation, purpose and scope of DARSIG to inform a wider audience about the existence of the group, and to provide a reference point to inform future developments. Part one of the article outlines the domain of interest in terms of decisions, assessment and risk in social work, and the connections between them. Part two of the article goes on to outline the establishment of the Special Interest Group and future directions for research on decision making, assessment and risk in social work.

**>Focus of research on decision making, assessment and risk**

Knowledge about the effectiveness of interventions is essential to the profession, but so too is a knowledge base about:

* risk factors where social workers are charged with addressing risk;
* understandings of processes of assessment and professional judgement; and
* a knowledge and skill base for collaborative and contested processes of decision making with clients, families, other professionals and organisations.

A broader range of knowledge to underpin decisions, assessment and ‘risk work’ is complementary to evidence of the effectiveness of interventions (Taylor, 2013). We also need theoretical conceptualisations that inform research and enable us to develop generalizable knowledge to improve our teaching about professional judgement, decision and assessment processes, and the management of risk. These are outlined briefly in turn.

**The current attention to ‘risk’ in social work**

Much current social work in the Western world is directed at reducing harm or preventing 'risk of harm' for clients at whatever ecological level - individuals, families, communities, or organizations. Yet, the concept of risk often remains vague (Roets, Rutten, Roose, Vandekinderen, & Soetaert, 2015).

Risk may be defined as a 'probability of harm occurring' (Gigerenzer, 2014; Parton, 2011). For example, there is a body of research on statistical approaches to predicting child abuse (Johnson, Clancy & Bastian, 2015) although precision across type of abuse is variable. There is substantial evidence on risk factors for suicide in mental health (Monahan et al., 2001) and on reoffending (Thornton, 2007). However, knowledge about risk factors in some other domains of social work - such as in relation to steps towards independence for a person with disability, or risk of hospitalisation or requiring out-of-home care for an older person – is not as strong. Safety and wellbeing issues are increasingly conceptualised in terms of ‘risk’. This includes not only the assessment of health and safety risk, and the assessment of the probability of abuse or neglect to children or vulnerable adults, but includes also managing risk in organisations (Taylor & Campbell, 2011) and communicating about risk (Taylor & McKeown, 2013).

There is a diverse literature on the sociology of risk and on managing risks within an organisation. The term ‘at-risk’ is often used in social work without a clear definition of the specific harm referred to, or a clear understanding of the underlying social norms and assumptions (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000). Let us take, for example, the use of the term ‘children at risk’. When a girl aged 12 is taking care of two younger siblings at home every afternoon when the parents are at work, is this situation of ‘children at risk’ (of neglect), or is it a responsible behaviour on the part of the parents, living the young under the care of the older? In modern Western societies, this might be considered a case of a risk of neglect (Anderson, Ringle, Ingram, Ross, & Thompson, 2017). However, a generation or two ago, and in many other societies and some sub-cultures within Western societies, this would be considered a responsible and reasonable choice on part of the parents. Parental behaviours that in the recent past (in Western society) were considered normal and perfectly acceptable may be construed today as ‘abuse’ (e.g. spanking a child) or ‘neglect’.

In order to overcome the ambiguity of the concept of ‘risk’, it is not always enough to define the expected harm, and intervene in order to prevent it from occurring. Usually some harm has already occurred. For example, a child who is being physically abused is already suffering at least some harm. There is a need to define the stage at which the intervention is taking place, and to define the concept of prevention and protection (Andershed & Andershed, 2015; Fraser, Galinsky, & Richman, 1999; McCave, Rishel, & Morris, 2013; Rapoport, 1961), which may be regarded as having three stages: primary, secondary and tertiary. Primary prevention includes measures to avoid the occurrence of harm, and to protect from its occurrence. Secondary prevention includes steps for early detection of harm occurring, and interventions to avoid further development and expansion. Tertiary prevention comes to play when harm had already occurred, with irreversible consequences, and the only measures to be taken to contain and control the magnitude of the problem.

A key task for the profession is to consider how common understandings of ‘risk’ can be developed for use in social work research given the breadth of legal, sociological, organisational and psychological constructs. The beginning knowledge on risk factors needs to be consolidated for teaching purposes, and research is required on the interactions (mitigating effects) between factors. There are also emotional dimensions to ‘risk’ such as the fear of blame if some undesirable harm occurs which services have been trying to prevent, and the ‘wariness of lurking conflict’ (Reason, 1990; Taylor, 2006b). These developments need to be related to our established knowledge and practice of assessment (e.g., Calder, 2016, in relation to child abuse), and the possibilities in study of professional judgement and decision processes.

**The centrality of ‘assessment’ in social work**

Assessment is often seen as a self-evident ‘heart’ of social work. Assessment serves as a gate-keeping point for the provision of services (e.g. Walker & Beckett, 2005; Hietamäki, 2015; de Ambrogio, Bertotti, Merlini, 2007). Assessment is the beginning of forming a working relationship with the client or family (Taylor, 2017a) for joint work on problem solving. Assessment affects the *accountability* of the profession, particularly in being a mechanism to measure need and (when repeated) to give an indication of the effectiveness of interventions (Dunn & Mulvenon, 2009; Taylor, Killick, & McGlade, 2015). Looking from an international perspective, the words used to indicate the professional action of ‘assessing’ differ, together with the meanings attributed to this. In some countries, as in Italy and France for instance at the present time, the term ‘assessment’ is rarely used – an equivalent term to ‘evaluation’ is used instead.

Assessment can be defined as a distinct stage before services and interventions (Taylor & Devine, 1993) although re-assessment occur. Assessment can focus on the risks, needs and strengths of individuals, families and their wider circumstances (e.g. Crisp, Anderson, Orme, & Lister, 2006). Assessment may be part of an investigation-based approach, characterized as using standard measures and with more focus on risks (Hill, Stafford, & Lister, 2002; Gilbert, 2012). Social work assessment involves a consideration of both the final outcome (‘the assessment’) and the process through which the assessment is carried out. There is debate about the level of standardization deemed necessary, against the space given to discretion, reflecting issues in the debate about actuarial and clinical (statistical and intuitive) judgement (Chomycz & Schmidt, 2016).

Robust research on assessment is central to supporting social workers in the decisions they must make. This can take the form of developing structured assessment instruments and tools (particularly for child protection and criminal justice), though these have in the past been less popular in Europe than in North America and Australasia. Whilst some specialist assessment tools have a strong theoretical base, many more general assessment systems are more pragmatic than theoretically driven. Assessment has a function in coordinating professional activity, and this may be a driver in assessment tool design as much as standardised measuring (Department of Health, 2000; Taylor, 2017a). Social work assessment develops in a human relationship**,** so that emotions, power and ethical dimensions needs to be taken into account (Bertotti & Casartelli, 2007), in addition to considering organizational aspects of allocating scarce social welfare services.

A key task for the profession is to develop assessment tools and processes that can simultaneously and efficiently incorporate both client and agency perspectives; gather information for service planning yet also remain focused on the needs of this presenting client or family; and enable equitable distribution of services yet accommodate flexibility in relation to individual needs and professional discretion. There are a few international comparative studies (e.g. Benbenishty et al., 2015; Léveillé & Chamberland, 2010; Skivenes & Tefre, 2012) although better communication across countries could foster more extensive and useful comparison. The development of assessment should incorporate more effectively the growing focus on risk (in terms of possible future harm); assessment that is proportionate to need (Taylor, 2012b); and analysis so as to better inform professional judgement and decision processes.

**Emerging study of professional judgement and decision making in social work**

Professional judgement and decision making are central to social work practice (Wallander & Molander, 2014) although the study of professional judgement and decision making specifically in relation to social work is in its infancy (Bastian & Schrödter, 2014). The nature of social work decisions varies considerably geographically and across different settings as social workers have different roles in professional judgement, decision making (Ponnert & Svennson, 2016) and their responsibilities in relation to possible future harm.

Although human judgement is a reasonably well-established aspect of study in psychology, the application to professional judgement and client judgements in social work is limited. A key issue for social work is that the decision making is frequently not only an individual, cognitive process but a collaborative one with clients, families, courts, other professionals and other organisations. In order to understand decision making, Simon (1956) argues that we need to understand both the individual decision maker and their decision environment. In social work, this means recognising the wider systems within which decision processes take place - both collaborative and contested decisions (Taylor, 2017a) - including relationships with clients, families, other professionals, systems and organisations such as courts. The Decision Making Ecology (Fluke, Baumann, Dalgleish, & Kern, 2014; Graham, Dettlaff, Baumann, & Fluke, 2015) and the ecological model of judgement (Helm & Rosech-Marsh, 2016) can provide useful models for improving the quality of decisions (Gambrill & Shlonsky, 2000).

Social workers often make decisions that involve tensions between multiple and potentially conflicting legal, ethical and societal values (Bode, Marthaler, Bastian, & Schrödter, 2012; Keddell, 2011). This raises issues not only about ethical dilemmas but also about emotional aspects of decision making, such as feelings of regret, confidence, stigma and shame (Regehr, Bogo, Shlonsky, & LeBlanc, 2010). Whilst there is growing research about ethical aspects of decision making, the emotional context of decision making is relatively under-researched (but see, e.g., LeBlanc, Regehr, Shlonsky, & Bogo, 2012) as is specific attention to decision support (Liedgren, Elvhage, Ehrenberg, & Kullberg, 2016).

The small but growing body of research on judgement and decision processes in social work has drawn upon the more established literature in cognitive psychology. This has historically focused upon the limitations of intuitive judgements viewed as biases, and how predictable errors can be avoided (Kahneman, Slovic, & Tversky, 1982; Munro, 1999. More recently, there has been interest in more positive approaches to intuitive models as embodying useful human heuristics or short-cuts for efficient decisions in the real world (Taylor, 2017b). Naturalistic decision-making approaches have studied how experienced practitioners demonstrate intuitive expertise in real life situations (Klein, 1999; Platt & Turney, 2014). There is also work on simple ‘fast and frugal’ heuristics that can outperform both optimising strategies and clinical (professional) judgement (Gigerenzer & Gaissmaier, 2011; Taylor, 2017b).

A key challenge for the profession is to draw on and build upon the diverse sources of research on professional judgement – and the more limited material on decision processes – and to integrate this with our more established knowledge base on assessment and the growing science of risk. A particular challenge on this topic is to develop research methods suited to study of judgements and decisions (Benbenishty, 1992).

**Integrating knowledge across the domains**

The connections between the three elements that are the focus of this paper – and the focus of DARSIG – are still at an early stage of development. Sufficient connections are evident, however, to justify attention to their inter-connectedness. The social work profession has, in much of the world, moved beyond simply addressing presenting need; we are now expected by society to consider the possibility of future harm (‘risk’). This consideration of risk needs to inform assessment processes and tools, and the way in which we make professional judgements and engage in decision processes. The statistical prediction of risk has a role within some aspects of assessment and hence within assessment tool design. Each Inquiry into a regrettable event (such as a child homicide, a suicide or an elderly person dying as a result of an ‘avoidable’ accident) seems to assume that statistical risk factors have been taken into account in the decision making about care. ‘Risk’ may describe the fear of mistakes which may hinder good practice, linking to consideration of what constitutes a reasonable judgement in legal terms to avoid blame when such a ‘tragedy’ ensues (Carson & Bain, 2008). Our efforts to engage clients in shared decision making needs to consider language, numeracy and visualisation (Stevenson & Taylor, in press) for communicating about ‘risk’. Theoretical understandings are required in order to integrate research findings across settings and contexts (Turpin & Shier, 2017). The quality and quantity of research on topics related to decision making, assessment and risk in social work is variable across client groups and settings, giving scope for learning between these. These various inter-connections between assessment, risk and decision making provided the seeds that led to the formation of the ESWRA *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group*.

**>The Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group**

**Special Interest Groups of the European Social Work Research Association**

ESWRA SIGs are established by the authority of the ESWRA Board, following a submission that includes a statement of the field of interest of the proposed SIG; a provisional list of members; a convenor; and an indication of how the group might develop its work over time. As outlined in a paper at the ESWRA Board meeting in 2014, the SIGs are envisaged as progressing the Association in two ways:

* *first,* SIGs enable the development and progress of issues addressed in the conferences; and
* *second,* SIGs will act with considerable autonomy within the overall aims of the Association, thus enabling the development of extensive social and intellectual capital.

(<http://www.eswra.org/decisions_sig.html>).

A workshop on *Decisions, Assessment and Risk in Social Work* was held at the fourth ECSWR in Bolzano, Italy in 2014. Approximately 15 people attended, and the formation of a Special Interest Group was discussed. Participants at this Workshop, and others who had expressed interest but were unable to attend, were invited to give their names as potential members of DARSIG if it were approved. The *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* (DARSIG) of ESWRA was formally established at the ESWRA Board meeting in autumn 2014 in Aalborg, Denmark. The first official meeting of DARSIG was held at the fifth ECSWR in 2015 in Ljubljana, Slovenia. This was attended by 24 people from 13 European and two other countries. DARSIG Annual Coordination Meetings have taken place at each ECSWR since then.

Discussion at the DARSIG Annual Coordination Meeting in Lisbon, Portugal in 2016 created a statement of the Aims and Objectives of DARSIG, currently shaped as in Figure 1.

**INSERT NEAR HERE:** *Table 1: Aims and Objectives of DARSIG*

As at October 2017, DARSIG had 71 members, drawn from the following countries:

* Belgium
* Cyprus
* Denmark
* Eire
* England
* Finland
* Germany
* Israel
* Italy
* Netherlands
* Northern Ireland
* Norway
* Portugal
* Slovenia
* Spain
* Sweden
* Switzerland
* USA

**Scope of DARSIG**

At the DARSIG Annual Coordination Meeting in 2016, the indicative scope of interest of DARSIG was sketched out as in Figure 2. In addition to the overarching nurturing by ESWRA, the formation of DARSIG had the benefit of being able to build on the very successful biennial international symposia on *Decisions, Assessment, Risk and Evidence in Social Work* (DARE) which have been held in Belfast, Northern Ireland every two years since 2010 ([www.ulster.ac.uk/dare](http://www.ulster.ac.uk/dare)). This DARSIG framework built on that used for classifying abstracts developed for the Belfast DARE conferences. This framework will no doubt be modified later, but serves a useful purpose at the present time in shaping the scope of interest of DARSIG.

**INSERT NEAR HERE:** *Table 2: Current list of domains and topics of interest to DARSIG*

**Research directions on decision making, assessment and risk**

It is early days for DARSIG, but already the group has been productive in stimulating and facilitating exchange about differences between countries, which in itself enables us to reflect better on our own situations. Some research areas for development have been identified, such as the following.

* Understanding the sociological-ethnographical-historical diversity in definitions of terms, such as ‘risk’ and ‘assessment’, across countries, generations, cultures and social groups.
* Development of approaches to effective involvement of clients and other stakeholders in decision making.
* Studying emotional aspects such as fear of making a mistake and client perceptions.
* Studying ethical and legal aspects of risk and decision making such as what constitutes a ‘reasonable decision’ and situations in which ‘risk-taking’ is justifiable.
* Learning from diverse contexts about the usefulness of guidelines, regulation, discretion and varying approaches to assessment and decision making.
* Studying risk prevention in social work as related to primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention and the effectiveness of ‘early intervention’.
* Fostering development in assessment tools, including appropriate embodiment of the client voice, families where appropriate, statistical prediction, support for analysis and computer support systems.
* Developing efficient and meaningful approaches to measuring risk and strength factors, including case-control designs and use of ‘big data’ for data analytics utilising machine learning.
* Relating understandings of ‘risk’ to levels of preventive intervention and organisational systems for managing risk.
* Developing our understanding of decision processes and the part played by the communication of risk including the wider *benefits* and *costs* of assessing and preventing risk.
* Exploring effective use of risk and strength factors within professional judgement, and gaining a deeper understanding of professional ‘intuition’ and reasoning processes.
* Developing research methods suited to the particular demands of studying judgements, decision making processes and risk factors.
* Developing theoretical frameworks to enable integration of study findings.

**>Conclusion**

Improving the effectiveness of decision making in social work requires not only knowledge of the effectiveness of interventions but also knowledge about risk factors; skills in managing decision processes; and a knowledge base for reflective practice and the development of assessment tools and decision support systems. The task of progressing our knowledge and skills in decision making, assessment and risk is a challenge not only for individual social workers, but also for the organisations that employ them and for the profession as a whole (Taylor, Killick, & McGlade, 2015). We require theoretical frameworks through which to consider the component parts of what constitutes a reasoned, reasonable decision, built on professional assessment processes and taking account of risks. What is now required is a more cohesive approach towards understanding *decision making* and ‘*risk work’* across client groups and settings, and embracing our traditional professional strength in assessment processes. The ESWRA DARSIG will be a meeting point for those involved in research and theoretical developments in Europe and beyond who are interested in developing this domain of social work. Special Interest Groups can have an influential role in international exchange and collaboration.

Readers interested in joining DARSIG are invited to visit the Special Interest Group section of the ESWRA website (<http://eswra.org/decisions_sig.html>) or to contact the corresponding author of this article. ESWRA is encouraging special interest groups, such as DARSIG, to develop activities at dates separate from the annual ECSWR that will provide learning opportunities, develop research capacity and contribute to robust research and knowledge production within our own sphere of interest. This might include ‘summer schools’ on a particular aspect of the topic of interest, or on particular research methods. We have begun to develop trans-national research grant applications, starting to build on the potential for comparison across countries as well as for utilising the larger data-sets available if data can be synthesised across individual datasets. We would like to develop integrated models, building on robust research, of professional judgement; assessment and decision-making processes; and the management of risk. The overall aim is to develop high quality research and theoretical models for social work practice, management and teaching in decision making, assessment and risk, and thus contribute to the well-being of the clients and families whom we serve.

**Acknowledgements**

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of other members of the Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group, and of the Board of the European Social Work Research Association.

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*Table 1: Aims and Objectives of DARSIG*

*Aims of DARSIG*

The aims of the *Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group* of the European Social Work Research Association are to support the development of research on decision making, assessment and risk in social work and to promote the use of research on these topics to inform practice, management and teaching in the profession.

*Objectives of DARSIG*

Within Europe, in relation to decision making, assessment and risk in social work:

1. to develop research capacity and learning opportunities;
2. to facilitate the development and application of research methods to the field of study;
3. to develop collaboration in research and theory development;
4. to facilitate collaboration in presentations, publications, and developing teaching materials; and
5. to develop knowledge that will inform practice, management, regulation and teaching.

*Table 2: Current list of domains and topics of interest to DARSIG*

1. **Professional judgement** including reflective practice; models of cognitive judgement, heuristics and rationality; use of various types of knowledge; judgements in uncertainty; and bias.
2. **Decision processes** with clients, families, other professionals, systems and organisations; social work roles in court decisions; collaborative and contested decisions; and structured decision processes with clients.
3. **Assessment** **tools and interactive processes**, including screening, diagnosis and problem solving; assessing needs, strengths and risks; actuarial and intuitive approaches to predicting harm; and mitigating and moderating factors.
4. **Assessing and managing risk**, including conceptualisation, communication and legal aspects; organisational processes; positive risk taking; and societal context.
5. **Ethical, emotional and contextual aspects of decision making, assessment and risk**, including regret; stigma; and the relationship to professional, personal and societal values.