
Working with ‘risk’: It’s more than just an assessment idea

Tony Stanley

Dr Tony Stanley (PhD) has worked in frontline child welfare social work and academic teaching in New Zealand, Australia and the UK for the past 15 years. He enjoys the debates of academia and the translations of these for practice environments. Tony is a visiting lecturer at Westminster University. He is part of the senior management team at Tower Hamlets Children’s Social Care and can be contacted on Tony.stanley@towerhamlets.gov.uk.

Abstract

Social work practice invariably means attention to ‘risk’ and its multiple and at times contested meanings. This article reports on a series of workshops, held in New Zealand and London, with social workers and their supervisors, where we considered how the language of risk acts as a powerful influence in and through our practice. A central idea in each workshop is that there is much to be gained in learning from families about what they define as risky and how they manage risks in their lives. A more ‘family led’ way of learning about risk from the families themselves can teach us a great deal about what they see as risky, what they define as ‘high risk’ and what risks they may need to manage that could adversely affect their children or vulnerable family members. There is applicability here for all areas of social work because risk is now so embedded in contemporary practice. The message here is that a critical engagement with discourses of risk will assist us work toward risk management that should be an empowering practice for society’s most vulnerable. Considered in this way ‘risk’ is certainly more than just an assessment idea.

Introduction

Every day, and in every home, families manage risk. In fact, risk is something we all manage as we go about our day-to-day lives. Risk is such a part of contemporary life that some argue we are living in a ‘risk society’ (Beck, 1992); one where the detection and management of risk is big business (Webb, 2006). Like families, social workers also manage risk. This is a part of their day-to-day working lives notably in the fields of child welfare, mental and public health, probation and older person’s social work. This crosses the statutory – non-statutory divide because increasingly political and public pressure is such that social work is expected to locate and then resolve, swiftly, the risks that face society’s most vulnerable.

This best resonates in child welfare. Statutory child welfare social workers are in the business of making sense of risks facing particular children and families – as they assess it, and plan for the safe management of it. They do this with the aid of colleagues, their supervisors and a range of practice tools (Field, 2008; Kemshall, 2002; Parton, 1998). However, the language of risk is not straightforward. What do we mean when we say that a child or person living with mental illness is ‘at risk’? And, does the client’s family share our assessed definitions? Does the psychiatrist or doctor? This paper shows that a closer look at how the language of risk operates discursively in social work can actually help us learn more about the ways we draw

conclusions about the levels of risk facing the people we work with. There is applicability here for all areas of social work because risk is now so embedded in our practice.

Social work practice over recent years has become driven by the notion that social workers are responsible for preventing tragic outcomes like child death. Connolly and Doolan (2007) concluded that:

...where the agency itself had intended case reviews to provide an opportunity to improve practice, the media saw the reviews as the means of linking child deaths to instances of professional error or incompetence... We believe this has been critical in the emergence of more risk-averse practice by child welfare professionals which may paradoxically increase the level of risk for highly vulnerable children ... (pp. 14-15).

The paper argues that by enquiring into how families manage the day-to-day risk they and their children face, much can be learned about how family members actually build their understandings about risk. Just what constitutes risky behaviours, or is an example of a risky situation, might be very different for family members and social workers and indeed for other professionals involved with the family. The promise here is that social workers can learn about how families make sense of and manage risk, and this offers much to inform our assessment and intervention practices.

This paper reports on a series of practice workshops, held with social workers and their managers, in New Zealand and in London, where consideration was given to how the language of risk acts as a powerful influence in and through our practice. The workshops explored the idea that families and social workers manage risk, and there is much to be gained in learning from families about how they do this. Rather than seeing risk as a language set solely for professionals, something 'experts' assess and set about to resolve, this paper suggests a more 'family-led' way of learning about risk from the families themselves. Families can teach us a great deal about what they see as risky, what they define as 'high risk' and what they may need to manage risks that adversely affect their children or vulnerable members.

The workshops

The workshops were an opportunity to explore and reflect on how social workers can confidently and competently explore constructions of risk and how this can then be presented to the family in a way that would engage them in actions to reduce risk behaviours impacting on their children and young people. The presentation style was interactive and participants responded by discussing and reflecting on their practice and the influences they experience. Feedback was positive and appreciative of the opportunity to sit back and take time to think about what actually happens in their day-to-day practice. The feedback from all sessions reflected the challenges social workers face in managing the volume of work they face on a daily basis with the need to unpack and explore the different views held by those involved. It is interesting to note that discussion generated in the New Zealand and London sessions highlighted similar themes; primarily that risk in practice is a complex idea, and something that needs space and time to unpack. The paradox of risk is that a surface approach and application to it actually increases risks to children, those with mental illness and others of vulnerability. Thus, space and venues to explore and critically engage with risk are crucial and advocated for. The New Zealand group consult model (Field, 2008) offers promise here,

however evaluations are yet to show to what extent discursive analysis is operating.

At the start of each workshop, a simple question was posed: What is risk? Participants had a few minutes to think about this, and then they discussed their answers in pairs. The responses were really interesting and varied. Some found that this was actually quite a difficult question to answer, while for others risk was something that needed to be found or identified. Discussion followed with a look at risk through history, and social work's relatively recent relationship to it. As a group we discussed the following points:

- A shift from a focus on 'needs' to one focused on 'risk' has occurred over the last two decades in child protection work (Kemshall, 2002; Webb, 2006).
- Practice has built on the notion of risk with a move from assessing need to investigating a notification of child abuse to decide if the incident did or didn't happen rather than exploring the context around the incident and what was happening for the family (Stanley, 2005).
- Importantly, service users have been increasingly lost in the classificatory systems of risk assessment (Parton, 1998).
- Neo-liberalism is a powerful contextual influence; one that favours classification, audit, measurement and efficiency (Stanley, 2005).

To ground these discussion points in practice, some of my research findings were introduced to illustrate the way risk discourses operate in practice. In the first set of social work remarks, we can see that presenting 'risk' as something concrete, certain and observable, that is risk was reified, helped to justify decisions made:

[The risk assessment] was helpful [in] confirming or affirming that *you saw those risks*, and it's okay [to remove the children] (Social Worker 3).

The [risk assessment] formalises things, [and] also *gives you something to back up* whatever assessment that you've come to (Social Worker 27).

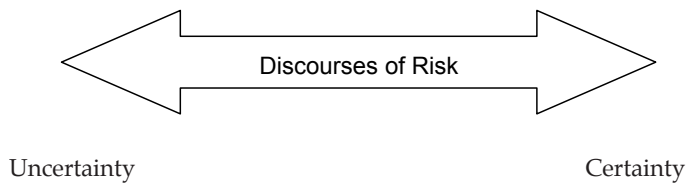
Next, participants were shown this social worker's comment:

[I made] the decision to leave the [teenager] there. I investigated the mother – I don't believe that [she] was at risk enough, to uplift (Social Worker 22).

The first group of social workers make use of the term risk to show that their practice decisions are justifiable, and that they are able to stand up to any scrutiny. Likewise, the second example shows that in a decision that involved leaving a child at home following an assessment, the language of risk was useful in supporting that position. The social workers' comments illustrate very different decisions; the first of removing children from homes and families, and, in contrast, decisions to leave them there. Yet both utilised a similar application of risk discourses. In both sets of decisions, risk is presented as a known or visible idea, something objective, or quantifiable, and something quite concrete: Risk was reified. Thus, the language of risk serves a purpose when employed this way. The purpose is one of justifying or legitimising practice decisions. It could be, of course, absolutely necessary to take such a course of action, and there will be those cases when there is no doubt that a child is in a situation of high risk. Yet by far the majority of cases are less clear, more uncertain and it is to this idea that the workshops turned to next.

We discussed that aiming for certainty, early and in every situation, may actually lead to premature assessments being completed. Aiming for certainty may conversely result in the premature closing down of assessment work, or reaching early decision points that may not take into account all of the risks facing children and families. In a small number of cases, in my research, a small number of children were placed in care while a risk assessment took place, when on reflection the social workers said that this was an unnecessary and premature step. The London workers concurred that this does happen, and that risk discourses can be used by police and other colleagues to pressure action by the statutory services. Workshop participants were then introduced to the idea of a risk continuum (Lupton, 1999; Stanley, 2007). Discourses of risk can be conceptualised along a continuum (see Figure 1) ranging from realist epistemologies, when there is little doubt that a child is at risk, to what Lupton (1999, p. 35) refers to as constructionist epistemologies: 'What we understand to be a 'risk' (or a hazard, threat or danger) is a product of historically, socially and politically contingent 'ways of seeing'.'

Figure one. The risk continuum.



This was projected onto a screen, and participants asked to think about the cases they are working on. They were asked to think about the previous social worker comments from my research – a reminder that for many child protection cases risk is not always able to be objectively known or something easily rendered as a certainty. Participants were asked what it is like to work with risk as part of their practice, and the majority of social workers felt that they were keen on heading toward the certainty end of the continuum and far less comfortable in working with cases when the risks were less clear, more nebulous and uncertain. To highlight this point further we showed the following research illustration:

Somebody has to be removed from that situation to eliminate that risk ... I think the most successful part of [decision making] was actually [being able to] eliminate the risk for [the child], the immediate risk for him, at that particular time, and putting him in a safe environment (Social Worker 3).

The talk of risk elimination here is potentially misleading, in that risk can never be totally eliminated from the lives of families (Titterton, 2005). This means that families manage risk as part of their day-to-day lives, and that this may offer us additional information for our assessment work. Further, the notion of risk elimination may set up unrealistic expectations of and for social workers, and, importantly, of and for families. To show how this can be countered, a series of questions were posed for the participants to consider for their own case loads or cases they are familiar with, and they discussed these in small groups.

- What does family X define as 'high-risk' for the child?

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- What might they say is an example of low-risk?
 - How do they manage high-risk situations?
 - What does family X say is too risky for them to manage alone?

Questions like these are not designed to replace effective tools of risk assessment, professional opinion or supervision conversations where thinking about safeguarding children and threshold discussions need to continue to take place. Rather, they offer the potential to learn from the families themselves, about the strategies and skills they have in risk management - to learn about risk from their perspective.

Opening up the 'black-box'

The second practice tool introduced at the workshops was the 'black-box'. Located in the cockpit of aircraft, a black-box (see image below) is a device that records the cockpit conversations and important details in flight, yet becomes a source of interest following accidents or disastrous events. The aim here is for the black-box recorder to be 'opened' so that investigators can understand how and why an unfortunate event occurred. This idea provided an exciting metaphor to workshop the discursive functioning of risk.



To illustrate this idea, and as part of the workshop, a small box with the words 'at risk' written in bold letters on the top was passed around. As this box was passed around group participants were asked to think about how this category is actually arrived at. They were asked to think about a case they had worked on, or are working on, where the term 'at risk' has been used, and then participants were invited to open the 'black-box' of risk assessment work, to see how this determination of 'at risk' was arrived at. These questions are not dissimilar to the discussions that can take place in supervision, where the supervisor and supervisee explore the practices of risk assessment work, rather than focus on the determination that particular children are in deed 'at risk'. Further, what the family have to tell us about risky behaviours or illustrations of high risk actions can be included in the black-box. All of these ideas can come to light when the box is opened, in supervision, and with families, and not only in the unfortunate event of a practice tragedy. The process is reflective in nature, and in practice, and the conversations that we were a part of in the session highlighted the effectiveness of this idea.

It is important to stress the need for these discussions to be part of a professional supervision relationship, a recommendation which reflects current calls in the United Kingdom for a stronger culture that is open to learning as we work, rather than waiting for a tragedy that significantly reshapes the child protection landscape (SWTF, 2009). This paper is not suggesting that increased discussion on what 'risk' is will avoid tragedies in practice, rather

more talk about what constitutes risk and what this may mean for assessment will open up the process and practices of how we determine a child is indeed 'at risk'. This may require a cultural shift within social work offices and organisations. For example, in my study one social worker noted:

[The] culture of this place is that you tend to defend your decisions and justify them, rather than using them as a benchmark for learning (Social Worker 69).

This was echoed loudly in the London workshops, where social work practice has been managerially dominated. Organisational risk management and client risk assessments can become blurred unless we have the dedicated places to explore the complex way risk discourses operate in social work; something these workshops highlighted.

'Practice does shift and change, and it moves on, and more and more tools are developed to assist social work make sense of family and child vulnerabilities' (Field, 2008). Yet risk discourses remain central to social work practice, and so far have received little if any critical engagement by social work scholars as they affect and shape practice actions and practitioner reflexivity (Stanley, 2005). Beddoe (2010) flags this for private practice supervisors, and Webb (2006) offers a useful theoretical backdrop; but more discursive risk analysis needs to be done through sociology in and for social work (Stanley & Kelly, 2010).

Vulnerability can be exacerbated by systems of practice that fail to encourage critical and analytic exploration by workers, and more needs to be done to include client understandings of what we mean when we talk about risk. This is now the main body of my work in London; and it is very exciting to see what we can do in social work bureaucracies when we invite practitioners and managers to critically engage into discursive constructs like risk. Families can actually manage many of the risks that their vulnerable members may be facing, and we need to engage them more fully into our work; something New Zealand has long led the way in and something the UK has to improve on (SWTF, 2009).

Conclusion

Social work is under increased scrutiny today, with tragedies in practice widely reported on, influential in shaping our systems of practice. Child welfare and mental health practice are two high profile examples. Yet we can employ the language of risk in our practice without our explicit knowledge about what may result. Reifying risk can lead to premature assessments and narrow intervention strategies. And this is an important message to all areas of social work. How can we weave client understandings of risk into our work? What can we learn about how elderly people cope in their own homes; how people living with mental illness are understood by their families; and limits on childhood risk taking having as yet unknown consequences. In what ways might our systems of practice encourage service applications for risk when we need a more critical and sociological engagement with it? This paper is an argument for a more critical engagement. Use these tools in your workplace; the risk continuum and black-box will generate conversations about risk and perhaps highlight where organisational and societal pressures interface with the empowerment potential that social work must achieve.

This paper has reflected on a series of training workshops, delivered in New Zealand and London. These workshops opened a discussion around risk discourses, and how these

operate in practice to both shape the work we do, and in turn shape us as practitioners. Social workers need to be able to consider the language of risk when exploring notions of danger/harm and safety and protection. If the expectation is that practice must operate at the certainty end of the risk continuum then establishing client safety becomes an absolute and a professionally driven decision. 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. Considered in this way 'risk' is certainly more than just an assessment idea.

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