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Advancing social work research and practice: Celebrating ten years of the Decisions, Assessment, and Risk Special Interest Group (DARSIG) --Manuscript Draft--

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Provide a tweet Please provide a tweet for us to send out about your article, so that we can help promote your work as widely as possible. The tweet should summarise the key findings of your article in laymen's terms, and be no longer than 240 characters.	
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**Advancing social work research and practice: Celebrating ten years of the Decisions,
Assessment, and Risk Special Interest Group (DARSIG)**

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Campbell Killick is a lecturer in Social Work at the University of Ulster. He teaches on undergraduate (qualifying) and post-graduate (post-qualifying) courses, including being Course Director for the postgraduate Research Methods Programme and the MSc in Development and Co-Production of Social Care Research designed for service users and carers. Before joining the University, Campbell held the Research Officer: Social Work role at one of the Health and Social Care Trusts in Northern Ireland. His social work experience includes working with people who have disabilities and mental health problems, as well as older people. Campbell's PhD was on professional decision making in relation to the abuse of older people, and his research focuses particularly on adult safeguarding. He is an author on Understanding and Using Research in Social Work and Working with Aggression and Risk in Social Work, and an editor of Handbook of Decision Making, Assessment and Risk in Social Work, all published by Sage.

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Alessandro Sicora, PhD, is a professor at the University of Trento (Italy) where he teaches on Social Work Undergraduate and Master's Programs and researches on social work. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the European Association of Schools of Social Work (EASSW) from 2011 to 2015, chair of the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) from 2021 to 2023 and president of the Italian Society of Social Work (SocISS) from 2015 to 2021. Currently a Marie Curie Fellow, and a Research Associate of the Department of Social Work, Stellenbosch University, South

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Abstract

This article commemorates the tenth anniversary of the Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group (DARSIG) established under the umbrella of the European Social Work Research Association (ESWRA) in 2014. We reflect on developments in DARSIG in the context of advancements in practice, service management, theory, collaborative research, and teaching on Decision-making, Assessment and Risk (DAR). We conclude that DARSIG provides a mechanism for further advancing social work research and teaching across Europe.

Keywords

social work; decision-making; assessment; risk; DARSIG; research; teaching; collaboration.

Introduction

Established in 2014 as one of several Special Interest Groups under ESWRA, the Decisions, Assessment and Risk Special Interest Group (DARSIG) set out to foster understandings related to these topics across client groups, practice domains, educational settings and countries. Today, DARSIG has 108 members in 29 countries: Australia, Belgium, Canada, Croatia, Cyprus, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Lithuania, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovenia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the four countries in the UK, and the USA. This article outlines key insights emerging from DARSIG's work and activities to date.

The absence of shared terminology poses a challenge in cross-national and cross-sectoral collaborations (Bertotti and Fargion, 2023). DARSIG's work to build mutual understanding has simultaneously deepened awareness of similarities and differences among national and local decision-making contexts. Key contributions include theoretical work on models of rationality for social work (e.g. Helm, 2022; Helm et al, Forthcoming; Taylor, 2020), intuition in practice (Cook, 2017), decision-making thresholds (Platt and Turney, 2014; Turney et al, 2024) and teaching methods (Bertotti, 2016; Whittaker 2018), contributing to the literature of critical thinking and error prevention in social work (Taylor et al, 2023). Collaboration has resulted in co-authored articles and commentaries (Alfandari et al, 2023a; Alfandari et al, 2023b; Alfandari et al, 2024; Sicora et al, 2021; Søbjerger et al, 2020; Turney et al, 2024), books and book chapters (Taylor et al, 2023), and editing of journal special issues (Alfandari and Killick, 2025; Helm et al, Forthcoming; McCafferty and Taylor, 2020; Taylor and Whittaker, 2018; Whittaker and Taylor, 2017), shaping evolving processes of practice, policymaking, training and research in DAR.

Decision making and Professional Judgment

In social work practice and research, decision-making refers to the formal process of choosing between options following an assessment. Professional judgment is the evaluation of evidence by an individual to reach an opinion on a situation, risk, event or proposed course of action. Both are complex processes involving the integration of knowledge, values, beliefs, emotions, and cognitive processes that shape a social worker's perception of service users' well-being and service needs (Taylor et al, 2023).

While social work is pivotal in assessing risks and guiding life-altering decisions for service users, most decisions feature considerable uncertainty. Furthermore, in some situations, it may be necessary for social workers to make decisions against service users' wishes, raising questions about how and when service users should be involved in the decision-making process. 'Shared decision making' has emerged as a strategy to promote and prioritize service users' perspectives and rights, whereby service users and practitioners share their knowledge and views to make decisions on care (Levin et al, 2017; Nykänen et al, 2023; Nurmatov et al, 2020).

DARSIG members have employed holistic approaches to explore the integration of rational judgment and decision making with cognitive faculties including intuition (Sicora et al, 2021), blame and emotion (Sicora et al, 2023), and heuristics (Alfandari et al, 2022; O’Leary, 2022; Taylor, 2021) offering new perspectives to enhance our understanding of what social workers do in the ‘real world’ in contrast to positivist approaches.

Assessment processes and tools

Social work in many jurisdictions is characterised by the development, testing and use of structured and standardised tools and frameworks designed to be applied in conjunction with professional discretion and judgment, to assist practitioners in making decisions. These tools influence the information that social workers collect, and how information is prioritised (weighted) when performing assessments (Sørensen, 2018). Although standardised tools play a crucial role in social work practice, by guiding assessments and decision-making (Sørensen, 2023), their accuracy varies (van der Put et al, 2017), and many tools are not theoretically driven (Taylor et al, 2023). Publications by DARSIG members about social work assessment have also highlighted the necessity of understanding how emotions, power, societal structures and cultural factors are embedded in both decisions and organisational contexts (Killick, 2023; Rölver, 2023).

Understanding ‘Risk’ in Practice

Our work demonstrates that the focus on risk challenges social workers in European welfare systems to balance the necessity of assessing and managing risk with practice that upholds professional values rooted in social justice and respect for the needs of individual clients. Understanding risk as an evaluation of the probability and magnitude of a potential outcome differs from social and cultural perspectives on risk, which also influence social workers' judgments and decisions (O’Leary, 2022). Alfandari et al, (2023a) explain that the latter concept of ‘risk’ (sociological and cultural perspectives) is particularly evident in binary, ‘boundary decisions’ about whether to provide supportive services with voluntary engagement (care) or whether some level of compulsion or coercion (control) is needed for the best interests of the health and well-being of a client, family, or others in society. O’Leary et al, (2024) found that social workers’ decisions about child protection in cases of domestic violence were influenced by a pervasive cultural norms about dangerousness and safety, viewing mothers as the primary protectors of their children, even when they are victims. Gregory (2023) showed how negative media attention and critiques of social work practice led to defensive practices among practitioners.

Given that stakeholders may view ‘risk’ and their roles in risk management differently, a stronger evidence base is needed for effective risk communication in social work (Bagnisky et al, 2019; Przeperski and Taylor, 2022; Taylor and Campbell 2011). These perspectives, including the concept of ‘taking risk’, that may be inherent in a particular course of action (Taylor, 2021), are incorporated

in some social work teaching (Killick and Taylor, 2024). However, tools to accurately communicate risks are comparatively new in social work. Approaches that offer potential include defining frequency words more clearly (Taylor, 2017), using numeric measures (Stevenson and Taylor, 2017), using visual communications such as bar charts and icon arrays (Taylor et al, 2018) and structured drawing tools for working with children (Turnell and Murphy, 2017).

Methodologies for DAR research

Researchers need to employ a variety of data sources and methodological approaches to effectively understand and improve DAR (Hilder and Whittaker, 2023; Gautschi and Ghanem, 2023; Gautschi and Benbenishty, 2021; Killick and Taylor, 2023). Administrative data and case data offer the potential to study factors associated with professional judgment and decision-making processes (Gautschi and Ghanem, 2023; O’Leary and Lyons, 2023; O’Leary et al, 2024). Such data can be linked to surveys of professionals or agencies (Dettlaff et al, 2021; O’Leary and Lyons, 2021) to develop predictive models of decision making (Alfandari et al, 2024). The increasing availability of large, population-wide, linked administrative datasets in Europe has led to a surge in the creation and evaluation of predictive models and algorithms, developed using machine learning and other statistical techniques, to identify children at risk of maltreatment or entry into out-of-home care (Søbjerg, 2022). Several DARSIG members are currently undertaking research in this area, capitalizing on the rich linked administrative data accessible in Denmark¹, Israel² and Wales³

DARSIG members have used a range of qualitative, and mixed methods to gain proximity to decision-making in day-to-day practice, including ethnographic studies (Saltiel, 2016; Bastian, 2017; Helm, 2017; Whittaker, 2018; Dixon, 2023; Ebsen et al, 2023; Gregory, 2023), cross-sectional studies and case studies (O’Leary, 2022). Simulated cases can be used to compare social workers’ judgments and the impact of case factors through experimental manipulation (Gautschi and Benbenishty, 2021). Alfandari et al, (2022) investigated how child gender, ethnicity, and socio-economic status affect child maltreatment assessments using an experimental vignette. Although text vignettes remain most commonly used, other types of stimuli, including photos (Middel et al, 2022) and virtual reality simulations (Du et al, 2023), have been used by DARSIG members to explore differences in decision-making.

DAR research has involved a range of theoretical frameworks. Helm (2022) used Hammond’s (1996) cognitive continuum theory to explain how child and family social workers move between intuitive and analytic reasoning in different contexts. Whittaker (2018), Cook (2017), and Gregory (2023) drew

¹ <https://www.ucviden.dk/da/projects/underretninger-i-fokus>

² <https://ravitalfandari.haifa.ac.il>

³ <https://healthandcareresearchwales.org/researchers/our-funded-projects/predicting-risk-entry-and-re-entry-care-and-risk-placement>

on the work of Klein (2015) to examine the role of intuition in day-to-day decision-making, whilst Ebsen et al, 's (2023) observations of group interviews with social workers were analysed using heuristics (Kahneman, 2011) and 'satisficing' judgments (Simon, 1979) as theoretical lenses. O'Leary (2022) combined these lenses with the Decision Making Ecology (Baumann et al, 2014) to describe and visually map at different levels in the system, social workers' rationales for their judgments and thresholds for decision making. Weick's (1995) work on sense-making and story-building has been used to develop a model of social work sense-making (Gregory, 2023). Bastian (2017) drew on Latour's (1994) notion of hybridization to examine how social workers and assessment tools interact to shape outcomes. And Dixon (2023) used sociological theories of risk to examine how social workers make adult safeguarding decisions.

Teaching and training for DAR

DARSIG has also played a role in developing teaching and training in social work. Many DARSIG members have focused on developing teaching and training DAR in social work, employing a range of methodologies including new technologies. This includes developing our use of mathematical models within risk assessment (Taylor, 2021), using vignettes and providing immediate video feedback on judgments (Whittaker, 2018), and Virtual Reality to provide more realistic and interactive practice simulations (Du, 2023). Additionally, DARSIG members are guest editors for an upcoming special issue of *Social Work Education* on teaching and learning about judgments and decision-making (Helm et al, Forthcoming).

Conclusions

After a decade of innovation and collaboration in research and teaching across Europe, we can build on the progress that has already been made as we continue to strive for further improvements and advancements in our collaborative work. Some future aspirations include expanding the range of practice disciplines represented; aspiring to more participatory approaches including service users and practitioners; applying for funding for cross-country research and exploiting to maximum capacity the integration of new technologies and traditional research methods to achieve our research goals.

For those of us involved, DARSIG has fostered longstanding respectful relationships, provides a mentoring role for professional development and enables early career researchers to hone skills, form partnerships and develop international research projects.

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