



Meta-theoretical paradigms underpinning risk in child welfare: Towards a position of methodological pragmatism



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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to explore the 'natural attitude' underpinning risk practices in child welfare. This refers to various taken-for-granted approaches to risk that social workers and other human service professionals draw upon in their everyday practice. The approach proceeds by identifying and critically examining three key, meta-theoretical paradigms on risk which typically shape the natural attitude. They are labelled 'objectivist', 'subjectivist' and 'critical'. The ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological premises supporting each paradigm, and how they shape risk practices, are then reviewed leading to a composite, meta-theoretical position on risk termed 'methodological pragmatism'. This position draws on the strengths of each paradigm and is formulated into ten propositions which consider how risk should be approached in child welfare. Within this corpus of thought salient themes are endorsed such as the need for method triangulation, an examination of 'deep causality', and the promotion of emancipatory perspectives. By critically reflecting on meta-theory, the paper contributes to the development of substantive theories of risk assessment and management in child welfare.

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1. Introduction

Risk continues to exercise the collective imagination in contemporary society. Whether the threat emanates from environmental disaster, economic melt-down, international terrorism, large scale epidemics or the vagaries of the lifecourse, our collective preoccupation with risk assessment, prediction and safety, still makes Ulrich Beck's (1992) watershed thesis on the 'risk society' apposite for today's world. This axiom takes on a particular purchase when we consider current discourses and approaches to risk in child welfare. In this context, risk has been medicalised, legalised and professionalised (Barsky, 2009; Lonnie, Parton, Thomson, & Harries, 2009). We see these trends within various organisational contexts in social work, where an instrumental approach has been applied to the management of risk, often shoe-horning it into a framework of audit and governance—a trend that is counter-intuitive, some argue (Broadhurst, Hall, Wastell, White, & Pithouse, 2010; Kemshall, 2009), given the inherently complex, contingent, negotiated, and multi-factorial nature of risk in social life.

Yet, despite these complexities, many social workers in child welfare engage in risk-led practice in a routinised way. Tellingly, one might opine that risk has become so dominant a lens it is now part of the profession's *natural attitude*, shaping the heuristics professionals use in a taken-for-granted way to make sense of complex situations. For some practitioners (depending on their location and setting), the

natural attitude reflects a calculative stance, one that draws on actuarial principles; for others, the use of clinical judgement is the preferred *modus operandi*. This bifurcation has, at times, escalated into what White and Walsh (2006) refer to as the 'risk assessment wars'. Regardless of what stance is taken, though, and how it is critically interrogated, a gap in the literature remains evident. This refers to the limited attention given to the *meta-theories* underpinning these various, taken-for-granted, risk practices in child welfare.

Meta-theory addresses questions of ontology (referring to our 'being' in the world), epistemology (related to ways of knowing) and axiology (concerning the nature of values). In this way, it deals with first-order philosophical premises about existence and the nature of society. Moreover, it lays the conceptual ground for the development of substantive theories in the social sciences (Sibeon, 2004). These are specific bodies of knowledge providing a more detailed understanding and explanation of different aspects of life such as, *inter alia*, human identity (Lawler, 2008) and the lifecourse (Hunt, 2005). More broadly, a return to meta-theory enables the inquirer to understand, critique and improve substantive theory from the perspective of overarching views about social actors and social life.

The aim of this paper is, therefore, to define and consider the range of meta-theoretical premises on risk and how they shape the natural attitude supporting different risk practices with children facing various hazards in social life. In taking this step, I identify three overarching, meta-theoretical paradigms on risk and examine their ontological, epistemological, axiological and methodological suppositions. The strengths and weaknesses of each paradigm are then briefly appraised leading to

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an argument for a *methodological pragmatism* embracing an alignment of aspects of all three. Simply put, this suggests risk practices must be seen in the context of enabling and constraining psycho-social structures (which are often hidden from empirical register) and the impact of human agency. In this conception, risk practices are seen as the outcome of human intention and activity yet occur within the context of reproduced rules, norms and power, all of which circumscribe or limit creative action.

This exercise in philosophical and conceptual deliberation is much needed if we are to understand more fully contemporary risk in human welfare and how to respond to it with greater insight. Reflecting on meta-theory brings us back to fundamental assumptions which, if left uninspected, continue to mould actions in the empirical world. Our deepest beliefs, which are often implicitly held, influence what Giddens (1987) referred to as practical consciousness: how we act in an automatic way, 'doing things' instinctually rather than cogitating on them deliberately. Practical consciousness is like the beam of a torch lightening up only certain parts of a path while neglecting the wider terrain. Meta-theory illuminates this broader canvass of social life enabling us to challenge the wisdom of received ideas and long-held shibboleths.

This is an inquiry that moves from surface to depth, excavating unchallenged notions of risk lying behind the meniscus of everyday social work practice and therefore is congruent with a Socratic disposition which examines closely the prevailing order from a critical perspective. The aim, in all of this, is to enhance practices making them more sensitive to lived experience, more value-oriented (challenging oppressive mechanisms) and more informed about the nature of the social domains affecting outcomes in the lifecourse. Risk is such a contested, emotionally charged and agonised concept and, as such, needs to be deconstructed if we are to make meaningful headway towards more enlightened practices.

2. Key meta-theoretical paradigms on risk

I argue there are three prominent, meta-theoretical paradigms informing risk practices in child welfare and have labelled them 'objectivist', 'subjectivist' and 'critical' (see Table 1 below). In reaching this particular formulation I have drawn on and re-worked the seminal contributions from Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Chua (1986) on the nature of sociological paradigms. For these theorists, paradigmatic assumptions are mainly shaped by objectivist/positivist ontologies on the one hand, and subjectivist/interpretivist ontologies, on the other. Based on Dahrendorf's (1959) sociological theory, they also posit that fundamental questions about the nature of society are formative in shaping the sociological imagination. More specifically, they concentrate on whether society is fundamentally held together by consensual relations and social order, the classic Parsons (1937), or is more oriented towards conflictual relations, power, and coercion—as in the orthodox Marxian position. Endorsing the latter view of society, as conflict-bound, leads to a *critical*, emancipatory perspective.

It is through a thematic analysis of these contributions that the three paradigms were developed. An important consideration in this exercise was to set out a typology which was relevant, conceptually speaking, to the nature of risk in social life but also germane to social work practice. In this regard, having a 'critical' paradigm was important in terms of social work's strident commitment to anti-oppressive practice. Moreover, the categories of 'objectivism' and 'subjectivism' seemed appropriate for an examination of risk as they sourced different methodological approaches to risk assessment.

As can be seen from the table, each paradigm adopts a particular position on ontology, epistemology, axiology and methodology. Taking objectivism first, it propounds the ontological view that social phenomena exist independently of human agents. Here, social phenomena present as external facts which constrain or enable social action. Epistemologically, it suggests that we can provide 'objective' representations of the social world in an accurate, valid and reliable manner. Reality can be discovered and communicated to others. Aligned to this supposition, it contends that knowledge claims are testable through empirical observation or experiment. From an axiological stance, by way of contrast, objectivism advances the view that scientific inquiry should be a neutral affair, one that is value-free and dispassionate. In discovering facts we cannot progress to moral assertions as they are two distinctive categories which must not be conflated. This is what proponents of the paradigm refer to as the inviolable, fact–value distinction.

Objectivism relies on modes of inquiry that are sourced by positivism. This doctrine asserts that the only reliable knowledge is of the scientific kind. Positivism directs the inquirer to search for causal relationships and encourages the deductive testing of theory and hypotheses. It also leans towards a nomothetic orientation; that is, a search for general laws. That said, it is important to point out at this juncture that approaches to positivism have been tempered or even contested by various philosophers (for example, Popper (1968)) and social commentators (for instance, Benton and Craib (2001)). Thus, when it comes to contemporary sociological versions, the claimed neutrality of positivist methods has come under question particularly when it is conceded that observer bias may always be present in investigation even to a small degree. What is more, the sanctity of positivism's metaphysical premises has been overtaken by a focus on quantitative methods as the quintessential feature defining this approach. With this comes the pursuit of trustworthy data acquisition and analysis. Thus, positivism in modern social science is often seen as synonymous with applying scientific methods to study social phenomena without necessarily maintaining a rigid commitment to the approach's metaphysical claims concerning reality.

The aforementioned modes of inquiry give rise to the use of actuarial models in risk assessment in human welfare contexts. Such models, it is contended, enable the inquirer to reach an understanding of the level of seriousness of risk in a particular case rather than to predict specifically the occurrence of future harm (Shlonsky & Wagner, 2005). Hence, they must be seen as risk classification tools. It is contended, by some, that actuarial models can rightly claim the mantle of the 'gold standard' of assessment approaches (Schwalbe, 2004). This is justified on the grounds

Table 1
Three meta-theoretical paradigms on risk.

	Objectivist	Subjectivist	Critical
Ontology	Social phenomena exist independently of human agents	Advocates voluntarism, nominalism and solipsism	Social reality is both produced by social actors and has an independent, objective existence
Epistemology	Inquirers can make accurate, reliable representations of the social world	Knowledge is a social construction	Connects knowledge with power and ideology
Axiology	Scientific investigation is neutral and value-free	Inquiry is value-laden	Values can be derived from facts to highlight oppression
Mode(s) of inquiry	Relies on positivism	Relies on phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiographic inquiry	Relies on critical perspectives to effect emancipation (e.g. critical realism)
Approach to risk	Adopts actuarial tools	Makes use of unstructured/structured judgement and consensus tools	Makes use of retrodution and deconstruction

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