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Vyvey E., Roose R., Wilde L. de, Roets G. (2014). *Dealing with Risk in Child and Family Social Work: From an Anxious to a Reflexive Professional?*, "Social Sciences", 3(4): 758–770

### **Intellectual plot line**

The article investigates the specific domain of social work which focuses on child and family care. Within this field, Vyvey *et al.* focus on the anxiety experienced by social workers and the different ways to deal with this.

The article denotes the different approaches used in child and family care. Thereby the researchers argue that within family and child social work, a child welfare approach is better than an approach focused on protection and that too much controlling against risks can lead to the child feeling absorbed by the investigation. Through their study, the authors are giving a critical perspective on the shift from child care to child protection, which they find ongoing in social policy in Western countries.

This shift is interesting since more and more attention is being paid to the safety of children and young people in social work. As pointed out by the article, this shift can be explained as a response to some tragedies that took place, including the tragic deaths of Victoria Climbié, Peter Connely and Savanna. All these children were victims of abuse, although they were under the supervision of a social worker. Child protection has been revised with the aim of reducing the risk of other tragedies like these occurring. Due to the media attention provided to these cases, policies based on controlling and securing were created. This however leads, according to the authors, to a shift in focus away from social work that responds meaningfully to the needs and concerns of children and families to social work focused on managing risks. Vyvey *et al.* found in previous scientific research that this general trend ongoing in social work creates 'anxious professionals'. Social workers working in these newly created policies are often anxious about the possible consequences of their decisions and do not dare to give freedom to the people with whom they work.

The article states that due to the tragic media examples, risk is now seen as a negative term in social work. With their paper, the authors want to make a change in this

perspective of risk, making it into a positive term, since to them approaching risk as something negative can be dangerous. If professional social workers negatively see risk, this has an impact on their work. As Vyvey *et al.* (2014) state: “Social workers fear their physical and mental well-being, are blamed when things go wrong, and undermine the integrity of their profession” (p. 759). This is where the concept of ‘anxious professionals’ comes from.

Different scholars have already referred to “the need to speak out about fear” as a response to this fear of risks in the field of child welfare and protection. According to Vyvey *et al.*, in social work risk taking is an important part of the profession. With ‘the need to speak out against fear’ social workers reflect on their work and the risks they sometimes need to take during interventions. This ‘need to speak up to fear’ is being investigated by Vyvey *et al.* specifically in the context of Integrated Youth Care, a large-scale policy reform in Flanders. Similarly to other Western perspectives on social work, policies in Flanders recently turned to a dominant focus on risk avoidance.

## **Critical reflections on the opening paragraphs**

### **The abstract**

The abstract is very clear; it is a good introduction and easy to follow. This opening paragraph makes the reader curious for reading the whole scientific article; it is a clear way to guide the reader into the topic. The abstract explains the current issue around risk within social work and how this creates problems by explaining how fear-oriented policies replace meaningful responses to the needs and concerns of children and families. Besides this, the specific context in which the research is conducted, Integrated Youth Care in Flanders, is clearly explained.

Although the abstract gives a good introduction to the article, it does not present the results obtained during the investigation. Therefore, this reads like the beginning of the introduction with a clear explanation of the issue, because only this part is written down, instead of a full abstract. The abstract could be improved if it would include short information on the research method, the results, and a short conclusion. Another important element missing in the abstract is a clear presentation of the research question.

### **The Introduction**

The introduction has a very good structure. First, the social relevance and issue of the subject are explained by referring to interesting and well-known media cases. This invokes great interest from the reader, which is a good thing to start with. Next to this,

the scientific relevance is made clear by stepping out of the dominant discourse made in policies after these tragic cases, and which, according to the authors and based on their literature research, creates anxiety. Missing here are some clear scientific references and more explanations of the current state of affairs within the field of child welfare and protection. Most importantly, however, in the introduction a clearly defined research question is missing. The research question is not explicitly formulated. The structure of the research design used throughout the article is well explained at the end of the introduction. This overview of the article is easy to follow, and the order is logical.

## **Purpose**

In this article, the purpose of the authors is to make the readers, who can be academics but also professional's social workers, think about the concept of risk within social work. The purpose of this article is to bring this new knowledge to the field and specifically to foster a new perspective on how professional social workers can deal with risk and fear. Two different approaches to child care are examined: child welfare and child protection. The authors make their position regarding these approaches clear by giving a critical perspective on the ongoing trend in child and family care toward child protection. This issue of the article is well represented. Therefore, the specific context in which this research takes place is made clear, this is the case of Integrated Youth Care in Flanders.

As mentioned before, a clearly defined research question is missing in this article, especially in the introduction. The research question can only be distracted by reading the full article. A possible research question could be; 'What are the different perspectives on risk in Integrated Youth care in Flanders?' The research question is a dominant element within a scientific article; therefore, it is important to represent this clearly and straightforward.

## **Importance – social and scientific relevance**

The social relevance is well represented throughout the article. Alongside the media examples, the authors make clear that risk is an important factor within child and family care. Next to this, they show that risk avoidance can be dangerous in social work; therefore, it is important to investigate this subject. By the use of media examples and examination within the current context in Flanders, the authors indicate explicitly the social relevance of their article. Moreover, this subject is important to examine because reading this article can influence professionals and their work since by reading professionals could rethink the use of risk within their work and optimise their way of dealing with this concept.

The scientific relevance of this article is present in the comparison of different perspectives on risk in child and family care, specifically in the context of Integrated

Youth Care in Flanders. Other researchers have already examined the different ways of dealing with risk, differentiating between riskavoidance and risktaking. By bringing these studies together in one article and applying these insights within the context of Flanders, the researchers advance the knowledge in the field of child and family care. Although the study thus not only has social relevance but also scientific relevance, this is not well presented in the article; the authors do not make this scientific relevance clear for the reader.

## **Critical reflections on the main body of the article**

### **Theoretical framework**

The literature study of the article is extensive, the authors refer to a lot of different previous investigations to examine their subject. The theoretical part of the article starts really strong with a clarification of the main concepts based on scientific literature. While explaining the concept of risk, the authors refer to many scientific works. By doing this, they create a convincing literature study of the concept. They give great explanations of the other works and empathise the importance of these for their own study. They show how the concept of risk has been examined by other authors and how a ‘culture of risk’ has been criticised. By doing this, they set the stage for the issue they are reporting. After the clarification of the concept of risk, also the child welfare and protection, and Integrated Youth Care are also being clarified, as these are the main concepts of the article.

The theory that leads to the core of the research question this article examines is presented in the discussion about risk. This is one of the most important parts of the article. The authors repeat the explanation of the ways to assess and interpret the potential of risk. The authors make clear that every professional implants this concept of risk in another way, for some through risk avoidance and for some through risk taking. Although it is important to provide this clarity in the article, it does not need to be repeated once again. The way the authors formulate this makes their critique on the large number of interventions related to risk clear once again. Their critique is supported by findings in the scientific literature about a true “culture of fear”. In this explanation, some new research works are used as literature. However, because the message brought forward is a repetition of what has already been explained, the literature and authors that were referred to before could also be referred to here. Taking new research into account to say the same thing could thus feel like dropping names in the literature study. Of course, it is important to take into account already existing theories, which is done really well. The authors provide a literature study about the issue, and by doing this it is clearly explained how other theories already influenced the issue in contexts different from the Integrated Youth Care program in Flanders. The researchers refer, for example, to Stanford (2010) for the concept of ‘the need to speak up to fear’, while

doing this, they show that their research is done within a broader context of ongoing scholarly examination.

## **Methodology**

The methodology of this article is a literature study with a critical perspective on the dominant approach. This critical perspective on the literature study is especially interesting. This method is validated for answering the research question; although more empirical research on the issue could also be interesting, this can be seen as a proposition for further research. The article explains well which studies are used in the literature study. However, an explanation of the method the authors use is missing in the article and could be written down in the introduction of the article.

## **Results**

The results of a critical literature study are clearly presented, and the different perspectives are integrated here in the context of Flanders. The good structure of presenting these results of the literature study ensures that it is clear what is being discussed. The given example is a good way to present the results, which makes it easy for the reader to place the theoretical findings in context.

## **Writing style and structure**

The writing of the article is done by Dutch speaking writers. Since my mother language is also Dutch, it is hard for me to criticise if there is any remarkable Dutch accent present in the English text. I must acknowledge that due to this, I am biased to review whether or not there is a foreign accent prominent in the writing style. Other than this, the writing style of the article is easy to follow. Scientific words are used in the phrases where necessary. Key concepts are explained in a clear and straightforward way. However, since there is sometimes some repetition of ideas throughout different paragraphs, the article could be more concise.

The overall structure of the article is very good; the article starts with explaining the issue and ends with a concrete answer on how the different perspectives can influence professionals in their work. Thereby the presentation of the main concepts before going to the explanation of the results is a strong part of the article; this prevents misunderstanding by the readers. Although there is one recommendation that I would suggest regarding the explanation of the main concepts. This is the placement: my recommendation is to place the conceptualization of Integrated Youth Care part before describing the difference between the perspectives. Therewith the conceptualization and explanation of concepts

are made clear at the start of the article, especially since before this part the authors already start talking about the Belgian context. The reader can keep this concept in mind and with this idea, read the rest of the article; the reader will then have the right impression of everything explained throughout the paper.

## **Critical reflection on the conclusion of the article**

Risk can be dealt with in several ways within the profession of social work; this is made clear by the authors. A professional can deal with risk either defensively or reflexively. In the specific context of this research, child welfare in Flanders, the overall approach is protection. This approach constantly takes risk into account, and therefore social workers are influenced by fear. Vyvey *et al.* conclude that reflexive professionals, instead of anxious professionals are required. "Anxious professionals work according to a logic of risk avoidance rather than maximising their engagement in complex situations, which is typical for the reflexive practitioner, who works in the vein of a logic of risk taking" (p. 766). This statement taken from the article's conclusion makes their findings and the typology very clear. The conclusion is well represented and the most important results are mentioned. The conclusion refers to the dominant but problematic approach in social work practice, as well as the dominance of avoiding fear in theoretical social work research. Hereby the authors indicate the new knowledge they brought to the field by focusing on a critical perspective towards the child protection approach and by specifically researching this in the context of Integrated Youth Care in Flanders.

The conclusion creates a debate and a reflection for the readers themselves about how they are dealing with risk in their work, this is a very strong part of the conclusion. After this reflection, the authors end with a strong statement of how they think about the situation. They make clear that according to them, social workers do not have to be afraid of using risks; the professionals should be able to use risks in favor of their clients. Professionals should think about how they use risk without using fear in their work. The authors clearly present their position by defending a more welfare approach; this argument is well substantiated by their research results.

## **Further research**

Further research could focus on the impact of using a radical perspective on the policy changes, since this is not examined. More specific research on the impact of the article could be about the open debate the authors clearly wanted to create in the conclusion: "Did this debate take place? Did professionals reflect on their work?". If this article had an impact on how professionals dealt with risk and fear in their work, it would be very interesting to investigate whether this change in professionals' perspective from protection to care also influenced social policies itself.

## Evaluation of the article

Overall, it is a really good article, the presentation throughout the article is very clear. Because of the organization and overview, the article is easy to follow. The biggest strength of the article is the critical perspective on the current shift from child care to child protection. It has great research evidence and therefore has a convincing argument for social work professionals to take into account risk as a good concept more than as a bad one. The critical literature study is done in such a way that the results are very clear.

Here, the most important suggestions for how the article, which already has a high quality, could be strengthened even further are presented. One of the most important suggestions is given at the beginning of the article. In the abstract and the Introduction, especially an explanation of how other researchers have already examined the subject is missing. Therefore, also the research method of the article, namely a literature study, is not explained. The formulation of a clear research question will help improve these weaknesses of the opening paragraphs. Throughout the article this is made clear, but for the reader it would be more comprehensive to have this research question in mind while reading the article. A proposition for the specific research question is: "What are the different perspectives on risk in Integrated Youth care in Flanders?". Another proposition to strengthen the article is avoiding repetition throughout the reading.

The best part of the article is the conclusion where a start for a further discussion is presented. The aim of the authors is for the readers to reflect on their work and how they take risk into account. The conclusion makes social workers think about how risk influences their job; the authors want professions to ask themselves questions such as: "What are our ideas about risk and good social work? What do we consider to be a strong professional? What kind of responsibilities for whom does this involve?". With these questions, the authors want to create a public debate about risk-taking in the profession. The way this is presented stimulates reflection by the readers themselves.