

# Care and control in social work with a focus on child welfare situations – two sides of the same coin?

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## **Abstract**

Social wellbeing transcends individual wellbeing and hence implies interactions and relationships. As academics in this field, we accept the privilege of providing the space and opportunity to those who decide to embark on a journey to develop into professionals who are of service to those whose individual and social wellbeing is usually challenged. In the process, we invite them to consider various intricacies and nuances which are integral to practising in the social field. One intricacy relates to the notions of care and control. As our social welfare systems became more developed, the concept of risk took on a more central position in the everyday work of professionals working in the social field. This paper will focus on how professionals navigate through a minefield, as they balance care and control in their everyday work with service users. It will explore how these professionals, especially frontline professionals such as social workers, are expected not to be too risk averse, whilst simultaneously giving their all to carrying out professional assessments and developing care plans that ensure that their service users are not harmed or harm others. This paper shall consider how possible it is, in practice, to position care and control as sides of the same wellbeing coin, and, whether professionals can reasonably be expected to satisfy the demands of both these notions.

## Introduction

Service providers in the social field are of service to those whose individual and social wellbeing are usually challenged. The fact that besides individual wellbeing, service providers such as social workers, are also responsible for social wellbeing implies interactions and relationships and hence brings further nuances into the equation. A focus on social wellbeing places professionals in a particular position where they have to navigate through a minefield, as they balance care and control in their everyday work with service users.

## Care versus control

As our social welfare systems became more developed, the concept of risk became more important in the everyday work of social workers (Alfandari et al., 2023). This emphasis on risk brings up the question as to whether it is possible, in practice, to position care and control as sides of the same wellbeing coin. The question arises because risk-driven interventions challenge the care-driven interventions traditionally associated with helping professions and bring forth the dilemma of care versus control, of autonomy versus protection. Whilst care includes interventions which involve support for the individual, family, group or community in their own right, control is more concerned with intervening so that individuals and groups avoid harm to themselves, each other or other citizens (Alfandari et al., 2023). Thus, an emphasis on risk presents professionals with the challenge of marrying these two notions of care and control. Whether this can be done is however contested (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2013).

Front-line professionals such as social workers cannot do without a deep-rooted confidence in trusting themselves; trusting themselves to make the right decisions, trusting themselves to offer the best possible service to their clients. Through the years they have trusted themselves and accepted risk-taking as part of their role, whilst assuming that lacking the readiness to take calculated risks could possibly even lead them to be of disservice to their clients.

The criticism of social workers' lack of professionalism resulting from child death enquiries in the 1980's however, pushed for a more rational approach to decision-making. Whilst prior to this extensive criticism, social workers' knowledge, professional values, experience, looking at past evidence and basing their decisions on these pillars seemed to be enough to inform their decisions, they then found themselves stretching their skills to position themselves as predictors of the substance and severity of various dangers that might occur in the future (Calder, 2016; Zeira, 2014). In order to attempt to make as accurate predictions as possible, they started to use the concept of risk to inform their assessments and decisions.

Additionally another very strong influence on social workers resulted from the mass media coverage of issues related to child abuse. Mass media is usually sensationalist and very critical of social workers, at times demonising them and individually blaming them (Gilbert et al. 2011). This criticism places social workers in a "double jeopardy", as there are high professional risks which are at stake both if they over-respond to risk situations as well as if they under-respond to them (Colton & Welbourne, 2013, pp. 82-83). Although as Gambrell (2008) points out decision-making errors are usually systemic and no one person is to blame, the impact of mass media is huge and this collective systemic responsibility is often overlooked and social workers find themselves targeted.

In this risk-averse context, social workers may feel paralysed and robbed of their confidence to take calculated risk. They know that adopting a zero-tolerance approach to socially challenging situations such as child abuse is almost impossible but they also feel pressured towards risk-averse behaviours and decisions (Camasso & Jagannathan, 2013). This context risks creating anxiety in social workers related to making mistakes, as they are pressured to believe that eliminating risk should be prioritised over meeting the needs of families, hence being robbed of what Featherstone et al. (2014), refer to as their "moral identity". And as this anxiety takes over, social workers

then find themselves increasingly seeking to control, instead of empower their service users, losing the balance between intruding in people's lives and respecting their diversity and freedom. This possibly happens because social workers are trained to be certain in their decisions, knowing that so much could be at stake if the 'wrong' decision is made.

By the late 1990's however social workers began to be criticised once again, this time for the fact that the social work assessment had been diminished and diluted to an assessment of risk. They too were aware of this development and were unhappy with it themselves. In the early 2000's it became clear that this approach of risk aversion was betraying social workers' intrinsic values. It became clear that the excessive focus on those at high risk had its cost and this cost was related to cuts in service provision to those at lower risk "significantly reducing the investment in preventive services which would require a focus on need rather than risk" (Alfandari et al., 2023 p. 83). Various authors emphasised that social workers were born as experts of uncertainty and this is the status they should seek to regain. The secret, social work researchers claimed, was to once again become more daring in our approach and to let ourselves work creatively and innovatively (Stalker, 2003; Taylor & White, 2006). Gambrell (2005) actually pointed out that "a reluctance to consider errors as inevitable may result in overlooking uncertainty" and "a desire to avoid uncertainty is a source of error" (p. 17). These changes in attitude towards risk were accompanied with a push to move social work practice towards a family service orientation as opposed to a child protection orientation (Parton & Berridge, 2011, p. 62).

### **Care order decisions in Malta**

A study carried out in Malta in 2016 looked at child protection social workers' decision-making processes as they navigated the journey related to whether a child should be removed from parental care through the care order (Zerafa, 2016). The results of this study clearly depicted how real the care versus control dilemma is for these social workers. In this study, social workers were found to have done their best to build strong relationships with parents despite their child protection role. These social workers tried to build relationships "that aimed to bring about the necessary changes in the families' situations and attempted to avoid care order recommendations. Although they were working within a child protection services setting, their main aim was to help parents ameliorate their situation" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 258).

Social workers even spoke about having felt disappointed and let down, especially in situations where they realised that they would have put in a lot of effort and energy to help parents change but no progress had been made. They disclosed having encountered challenges in their role as child protection workers because different aspects of their role conflicted, with particular difficulties having ensued when parents required support and they turned to the child protection worker: "I wanted to be supportive towards the mother. I would have liked to empathise but it was difficult to do so when I had to protect the children" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 259). The care aspect of the social work role can be felt strongly in this social worker's words, despite the social worker having had to fully revert to the control aspect of her role: "I have issued enough care orders to see the suffering of the parents. When it came to this care order, I saw the mother suffering as well...despite her misgivings she suffered a lot" (p. 260).

When parents already had experiences where social workers exerted their control function, this impacted the development of a positive relationship with other social workers. In these situations, parents viewed social workers as a threat, as "those people who took away my son" (Zerafa, 2016, p. 260). Parents were reported to avoid contact with social workers to keep them at a distance – "they try to avoid the system" so "we would not have anything to back us up"(p. 260), further demonstrating the difficulties brought up by the conflict between the care and control functions of the social work role.

### **Final reflections and implications**

In the introductory section of this paper, the word 'minefield' was used as a metaphor to describe the professionals' daily struggle in carrying out their duties. This is truly what it feels like for many professionals going to work in the morning – going to a place which has many dangers through which professionals must thread with extreme caution in every step and decision they take. It is already bad enough that professionals must deal with increased workloads and a lack of time and other resources. This is exacerbated by the fact that they must also perform their duties with fear: fear of being judged, fear of making the wrong decisions, fear of being taken to court and fear of losing their warrants, amongst others.

Ultimately, it may be this fear that creates this constant tug of war between providing support to clients, their families, and the community, and the focus on avoiding the potential occurrence of harm. So, it seems like social workers and other professionals are constantly navigating through this minefield which is also occurring within an ongoing battle - a battle between doing what is right for the client while safeguarding their own profession because at the end of the day, it is this profession which puts food on their tables and clothes on their backs.

Another valid point which provides contemporary challenges to professionals is the impact of mass media which has been taken to new heights with the revolution of social media. Whereas in the past mass media was limited to newspapers, television, and radio, today, people can access mass media at the touch of a screen. This has created a shift in the role of people at home from that of a spectator or listener, to that of an active contributor through interactions such as posting comments and sharing posts. So, in addition to the damage caused by the media's critical and sensational coverage of particular cases, professionals are also at risk of being targeted by keyboard warriors. These keyboard warriors most often comment and share their judgmental opinions about different issues solely by reading the article's heading, and without even bothering to read what the article says. These keyboard warriors impact social workers and other professionals in various ways.

Professionals often experience emotional impacts as the comments written on social media can be highly critical, and at times even abusive towards professionals which may lead such professionals to experience feelings of anxiety, stress, and burnout which then impacts their performance at work. These comments may also negatively impact the reputation of the profession. Lately, news portals have been flooded with articles about the directives issued by the Malta Union of Midwives and Nurses (MUMN) over the government's proposals for the upcoming sectoral agreement. Some news portals misleadingly promoted the issue as "over 4000 nurses and midwives go on strike" (Balzan, 2023), leading to an unbelievable amount of judgmental and abusive comments towards these professionals. Ironically, most of the individuals bearing this judgmental attitude were probably also the ones clapping on their balconies during the pandemic and calling these professionals 'heroes'. It is amazing how quickly people change their opinions! Of course, a strike and an industrial action are not the same thing, but bending the truth helped news portals achieve the hype and activity that they wanted to create on their social media platforms, but at what cost? The obvious consequences here are the demotivation of professionals to carry out their duties, the tarnishing of the profession's reputation, and the risk of attracting fewer individuals to choose these professions in the future.

Where does all this lead us? In the end, all this has a domino effect on the type of service that clients receive: if social workers and other professionals are practising their profession in fear, they will then be cautious about the types of interventions that they adopt in practice - this will undoubtedly limit their client's autonomy. If the reputation of professionals is tarnished in the eyes of the public, how can professionals expect their clients to trust them and build a solid therapeutic relationship to strive for the benefit of the client's wellbeing? If the younger generations are discouraged from becoming social workers and other such professionals, who is going to safeguard and support the wellbeing of our society in the future?! Ultimately, social workers are being pressured into believing

that eliminating risk should be prioritised over meeting the needs of families. It is evident that even if they are not pressured into believing so, then the fear that they experience while practising their profession is having the same effect. In an ideal world, social workers should balance risk management with meeting their client's needs. Obviously, we do not live in an ideal world, so social workers must take an active role in achieving this balance between care and control. Zerafa (2023) has mentioned some tools which can help manage this boundary. One of the most important points is evidence-based practice. By adopting an evidence-based approach, social workers use what they know works in a similar situation. In other words they use the best available evidence to guide decision-making and intervention planning. This approach emphasizes the importance of using research findings and other forms of empirical evidence to inform social work practice and ensure that interventions are effective, efficient, and grounded in scientific knowledge. This has been associated with several benefits which include improved client outcomes, promoting accountability, enhancing credibility and promoting ethical practice. All these values are at the heart of the social work profession. Another strategy which may also be beneficial in helping social workers achieve this balance is increasing awareness and education about the social work profession. Increasing awareness might lead to build improved public understanding about the social worker's role within the various settings in our society. This may help eliminate any misconceptions that the public might have about the profession, bringing about a positive change in perceptions towards social workers. This may ultimately lead social workers to practice their profession with less fear and more pride.

### **Conclusion**

Alfandari et al. (2023) point out how "care versus control issues are now increasingly prominent in the assessment and care planning stage of social work intervention" (p. 83). Social workers continue to be expected to use assessment tools to predict harm, while they are also criticised for not exercising enough professional judgment in their decision-making and relying too much on these same assessment tools.

In such a context, we are left reflecting on what it is that is driving us in our interventions. Are we being predominantly driven by risk, by the desire to avoid harm? Or are we being driven predominantly by need, by that which our clients identify as being the conditions which can improve their quality of life? We are left pondering whether we can negotiate the inconsistencies between the demands made on us by the notions of care and control, whilst remaining true to the values of the social work profession. And hence the notions of care and control challenge us to go back to our roots and think about what we are standing for and whether we are happy with our current position. Finding the perfect balance between care and control and putting an end to the debate related to which of the two should take precedence when social work is being practised is probably impossible. Yet, becoming aware of what it is that influences our practice and the implications of being predominantly risk-averse, or of not giving risk the attention it deserves, is extremely important as it is only through this awareness that active steps can be taken to remedy situations where the relationship between care and control is caught off-balance.

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