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## **Comparing Social Work Students' Perceptions of Risk Using Online Discussion Fora: Lessons Learned from a European Pilot Project**

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**TITLE:**

**Comparing Social Work Students' Perceptions of Risk Using Online Discussion Fora:  
Lessons Learned from a European Pilot Project**

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## **Comparing Social Work Students' Perceptions of Risk Using Online Discussion Fora: Lessons Learned from a European Pilot Project**

### **ABSTRACT**

Comparisons of international child welfare systems have identified two basic orientations to practice; a 'child protection' orientation and a 'child welfare' orientation, which are founded upon fundamentally different values and assumptions regarding the family, the origins of child care problems, and the proper role of the state in relation to the family. This paper describes a project which sought to compare how undergraduate social work students from three European Universities perceive risk in referrals about the welfare of children and to explore the impact of different cultural, ideological and educational contexts on the way in which risk is constructed by students. Students from Northern Ireland, Germany and Poland examined three vignettes via ten online discussion fora each of which provided a narrative summary of their discussion. The paper presents some findings from the analysis of the qualitative data emerging from the student discussions and draws out the lessons learned in terms of how the project was designed and implemented using online discussion fora.

### **KEYWORDS**

- Risk
- Students
- Online learning
- Child abuse
- Europe

## **INTRODUCTION**

Comparisons of international child welfare systems (Gilbert, 1997; Khoo, Hyvonen & Nygren, 2002) have identified two basic orientations to practice. A ‘child protection’ orientation is characterised by a primary concern to recognise child abuse and neglect and to protect children from abuse, usually from their parents. It is, therefore, built around investigatory and legal concerns and the need to gather and assess forensic evidence in order to determine whether abuse has occurred and who is culpable. Child welfare systems that tend to be dominated by this orientation include those in North America and the United Kingdom (Gilbert, 1997) and Australia. A ‘child welfare’ orientation, by contrast, is characterised by attempts to understand events or situations thought of as being harmful to children within the wider social context of the difficulties experienced by families. It is, therefore, focused on the assessment of family difficulties and on providing therapeutic and practical services to address these. Countries exemplifying this orientation include those in continental Europe and Scandinavia (Khoo et al., 2002).

In comparing European systems with the United Kingdom (UK), Trotter (2004, p. 8) illustrates the differences by comparing the comments made by social workers during initial visits to parents suspected of child abuse:

“The British child protection worker commented: ‘We have had a report that you have been harming your children and I am here to investigate this.’ The European child protection worker on the other hand commented: ‘I have heard that you might be having some trouble with your children and I am here to see if I can help you with them or with any other problems you might have.’”

The contrast between these two basic orientations, it is acknowledged, risks oversimplification and they represent relatively extreme positions. Gilbert, Parton & Skivenes (2011), in an update of the comparative analysis conducted by Gilbert (1997), have, for example, identified much more nuanced approaches across child welfare systems as they seek to balance both child protection and broader child welfare objectives. The fact that one orientation tends to be dominant is what interests us here as they are underpinned by fundamentally different values and assumptions regarding the family, the origins of child care problems, and the proper role of the state vis-à-vis the family.

The project reported in this paper sought to compare how undergraduate students from three European Universities; one based in the UK [**Northern Ireland University**] and two based in continental Europe [**German University and Polish University**], perceive risk in referrals about the welfare of children and to explore the impact of different cultural, ideological and educational contexts on the way in which risk is constructed by students. The paper presents some findings from the project and also draws out the lessons learned in terms of how the project was designed and implemented using online discussion fora.

## **INTERNATIONALISING THE SOCIAL WORK CURRICULUM THROUGH THE USE OF DIGITAL LEARNING PLATFORMS**

Social work educators continue to seek new ways of exposing students to diverse cultural contexts in order to equip them for professional practice in a global context. Providing social work students with an understanding of the global dimension of their discipline can be challenging. In UK universities there are multiple economic, research and quality drivers for promoting internationalisation in higher education. The argument in relation to the many pedagogical benefits of internationalising social work curricula (Carter Anand & Clarke, 2009; Healy, 2008) is well documented although this enthusiasm for increasing international or global approaches to social work has been criticised for being potentially imperialistic and for undermining the need for the indigenisation of social work (Gray, 2005). It is important to accept both the need to address issues of cultural competence and the complexities of how to do this in a way which avoids reinforcing problematic and oppressive approaches to working with power, difference and diversity (Das & Carter Anand, 2012).

As with all education, the teaching of social work is being shaped by the digital age (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008). Technological advances have created a new range of possibilities for enabling international travel, collaboration, communication and dissemination. Examples include: provision of distance learning and supplemental online material via recorded classes, and other asynchronous material (Levin, Whitsett & Wood, 2013; Okech, Barnes, Segoshi & Carney, 2014), use of filmed vignettes in conjunction with verbal instruction and discussion (Ballantyne, 2008) and the use of video feedback in monitoring and modelling students' own behaviour and practical skills (Bolger, 2014; Fukkink, Trienekens & Kramer, 2011). This paper focuses specifically on the application of a digital discussion platform, which is a digital tool available in most western universities.

Movements towards digital learning platforms and internationalisation would seem from the outset to be a mutual fit. An advantage of a digital resource is its ability to transcend borders (Carter Anand & Clarke, 2009). Thus, first-hand experiences and perceptions of students and educators in response to specific examples of social work practice can be captured and shared with colleagues across different countries and continents. However, one risk of this approach is that, if a person in region A has no *a priori* understanding of the cultural milieu of region B, their ability to make sense of any individual narrative, vignette, image or event may be limited. Hence, the conclusions the person draws may more saliently reflect their affinity to their own culture than any new-found understanding of the culture they are experiencing remotely (Coates, Bird & Gray, 2008). It is precisely this persistent ethnocentrism and lack of critical and cultural reflection and reflexivity amongst students that educators are hoping to challenge through the introduction of international experiences (Das & Carter Anand, 2012).

### **RISK IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION AND PRACTICE**

The assessment and management of risk is a central aspect of social work education and practice. In Northern Ireland one of the key roles that students must demonstrate they are able to fulfil is to “manage risk to individuals, families, carers, groups, communities, self and colleagues” (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, 2003, p. 22). The relative importance of risk in social work education and practice, however, varies across time, area of practice and country. It is part of wider societal trends and the relatively recent dominance of concerns about risk in all aspects of life has been characterized by Beck (1992) as the ‘risk society’.

In services for children and families when societal and policy concerns about risk are increased the balance of services tends to shift towards child protection and away from family support. Parton (2011) has identified that, in the 1970s and 1980s, in response to a series of high profile cases and associated criticism of social work, services in the UK, North America and Australia became dominated by concerns about risk. This child protection focus widened to some extent in the 1990s and 2000s, reflected in the use of the term ‘safeguarding’ in policy and practice, although risk remains central. Munro (2010, p. 1136) has suggested that “responses to public criticism combined with the person-centred approach to investigating tragedies and managerialism have contributed to creating a very controlled and proceduralised workforce that mitigates against learning and adapting in response to new information”.

This is not necessarily the case across other countries, as identified by the Scottish Executive (2007, p. iv) who note that, in Anglophone countries, “the preoccupation is with thresholds and short-term crisis intervention, resulting in risk aversion and a questioning of the professional role” whereas, in European countries, “it is the relationship with the family that engenders trust and risk taking and validates the professional role”. Munro (2010), although highlighting this difference in approach, has suggested that it may be changing. She notes that continental European countries have generally avoided a high level of public condemnation of professionals in response to child deaths but that recent high-profile cases in the Netherlands and Germany indicate that a more blaming approach may be developing. Christopherson (1998, p. 57), in a study comparing English and Swedish social work students perceptions of risk, concluded that “there is little consensus within societies about what is acceptable behaviour towards children and significant differences between them.”

The research literature on the assessment of risk and subsequent decision-making also provides important warnings about the how accurately and consistently it is possible to predict the likelihood of future harm (Hayes & Spratt, 2009; 2014). Gillingham (2006, pp. 89-90) cautions that whilst “the identification of various risk factors associated with the abuse of children may assist in informing policies concerning priorities in the allocation of resources, because of the complexity of child abuse, they cannot be used to predict with any accuracy who (individually) will or will not be abused”. Munro (2010) reinforces this by arguing that our knowledge about how best to protect children is limited and that the organizations in which child protection workers practice, therefore, need to encourage learning. One possible means of facilitating such learning, in both social work education and practice, is through the use of online discussion fora.

### **ONLINE DISCUSSION FORA IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

In reviewing the literature on the use of technology to improve the effectiveness of professional practice learning, Quinney & Fowler (2013, pp. 1022-1023) concluded that e-learning can provide positive educational experiences for students when the structure and focus of courses offer ‘learner-centricity’ which they define as:

“...a friendly, focused, well-directed and technologically enhanced course that implicitly recognizes student diversity in terms of different learning styles, needs, motivations, and expectations.”

Greig & Skehill (2008, p. 639) also suggested that online teaching and learning may enhance social work education and training. In relation to online discussion fora specifically, they argue that they are a potentially excellent medium for student learning although they note many challenges in their use including time, access when off-site, focus of discussion, commitment of tutor, and confidence to be a 'poster' rather than a 'lurker'. Carter Anand & Clarke (2009, p. 595) also explored the potential of discussion fora to facilitate social work education across different countries (Ireland and the United States of America) and found that the "interpersonal contact between the students certainly raised consciousness of the diversity of global-local social work issues".

## **METHODOLOGY**

The methodology consisted of two stages. In the first stage, a vignette questionnaire was distributed to students in each of the three participating universities. Vignettes are short written, spoken or pictorial scenarios, hypothetical or real, on which respondents are asked to comment or give an opinion (Barter & Renold, 1999). The twenty vignettes presented in the questionnaire were anonymised versions of real referrals which had been used in a previous Northern Irish research study on child protection (Hayes & Spratt, 2014). The language and roles and responsibilities of the professionals involved in the vignettes were modified to reflect the different cultural contexts of child protection practice across the three countries. Examples of the vignettes presented in the questionnaire are provided below:

**"The School Principal reports that this morning child H, a 4-year-old girl, showed the teacher her school exercise book. It contained several sexually explicit drawings."**

(Vignette H).

**"The hospital doctor reports that child N, a 2-year-old girl, was admitted to hospital last week for a tonsillectomy and was discharged two days later. The mother of another child on the ward raised some concerns with the nursing staff about child N's mother's rough handling of the child and her attitude towards her. For example, she called the child a 'little rat' with clenched teeth and an aggressive facial expression. She also trailed the child roughly by the hand across the ward."** (Vignette N).

**“The teacher reports that no one picked child P, a 5-year-old girl up from school. The school tried to contact the child’s mother but she was not at home so they contacted her grandmother instead. The child’s school attendance is quite poor and she is regularly absent on Mondays and Fridays. When the teacher asks her why she was absent the child says that her mother was drinking and wouldn’t get up. She has talked about her mother drinking in a local bar. She says that at times she gets herself up and makes her own breakfast. She says that she makes her mother a cup of tea on the days that she doesn’t get up and says that she has burnt her fingers twice. The child also does not seem to know who is going to pick her up from school.” (Vignette P).**

Students were asked to assess the level of risk to the child/children in each vignette on a six point scale ranging from *No Risk* (0) to *Very High Risk* (5). The questionnaire was completed by 135 students of whom 50 (37%) were German, 45 (33.3%) were Northern Irish, and 40 (29.6%) were Polish and the resultant data was analysed using the statistical package Stata Version 12. The mean ranks given by students in each of the participating countries were calculated and compared using the Kruskal-Wallis test to determine if there were statistically significant differences between the three groups of students. This analysis revealed statistically significant differences between student groups in terms of their assessment of the level of risk to the child/children in the three vignettes (H, N and P) presented above (see Tables 1 – 3).

### **INSERT TABLES 1, 2 AND 3 SOMEWHERE NEAR HERE**

In the second stage, the focus of this paper, 30 students, 10 from each participating University, were allocated to 10 discussion fora which each consisted of three students, one from each country. Of the 30 students, four from Northern Ireland and one from Poland did not engage with the fora at all. The online discussion fora were provided by **[German University]** and the students were asked to discuss these three vignettes in greater depth. Specifically, students were asked to discuss the degree to which the child involved was at risk and the rationale for their assessments. One student from each of the fora was asked to provide a narrative summary of their group’s discussions of each of the three vignettes and the resulting qualitative data were subjected to content analysis in order to identify themes and categories. Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Research Ethics Committee **[School, Northern Ireland University]**.

## **FINDINGS**

Analysis of the narrative summaries from each of the online fora enabled the identification of contested topics and critical debates from the discussions that students from the three countries engaged in. These themes are summarised below and provide some insight into the rationales employed by students in making judgments around risk.

### **Vignette H: Perceptions of Sexual Abuse**

“If a child shows conspicuous behaviour which promotes to sexual abuse or even rape, I would decide to inform family court and police and take the child out of the family because this is a case of very high risk to the child.” (German Student).

The above quote illustrates the emotive and divergent responses from students generated by this vignette. Two divergent approaches emerged. The majority of students appeared to rate this case as involving a high level of perceived risk for the child concerned. They described the case as ‘quite shocking’ (Polish Student), ‘disturbing’ (German Student), ‘dangerous’ (Polish Student) and noted that inappropriate sexual knowledge in such a young child should be taken seriously. These students recommended the need for an interventionist approach by the social worker and other professionals involved.

“... if my concerns [sexual abuse] were justified then...I would have legal powers to investigate...because possible sexual abuse is the child being at risk of significant harm. I would be able to demonstrate that from the start I recognised possible signs of sexual abuse as a possible explanation for the drawings, while being open to other reasons.” (Northern Irish Student).

The alternative response by some students involved a broader consideration of cultural and social factors that would account for the behaviour described. As one student explained they would rate this as medium risk as “sex education starts at the earliest in first grades of primary school” (German Student). Students explored various reasons for the child reproducing this image given a child’s natural developmental curiosity about their body, parental practices around early sex education, the influence of older siblings, and exposure to inappropriate television programmes or magazine covers:

“I would say that this child is not at high risk, because it’s drawing these things. Maybe she has seen parents having sex and now is drawing what she sees. Children often draw things that they see. I’m not sure if a child who has been raped would draw in her/his exercise book.” (Polish Student).

Students tended to be more circumspect as to the suggested response by social workers and other professionals. One German student argued that the role of the social worker was to determine when the label of risk was to be applied. In Germany the focus is on the family as a whole rather than just the child and therefore it is important that social workers do not prejudge parents. She went on to explain that, in Germany, the social worker has to check or assess if there is any abuse in the child’s background and then make a judgment and explained that social workers need a sound explanation and relevant documentation to justify why the child is considered a child in need. The concept of a ‘child in need’ is used by professionals instead of a ‘child at risk’ in the German context.

Most students agreed that the vignette was not a conclusive picture and went on to discuss which professional discipline should take on the investigative role and how the case should be investigated. Students also debated the timing of the involvement of the social worker, other professions and family members. Some students felt that a social worker should be introduced into the family whereas others felt that more steps had to be undertaken before involving the social worker with the family. In relation to which professional should take responsibly to initially investigate this case, some students felt that the teacher should talk to the child or refer the case on to the school principal who would have the responsibility to undertake the investigation and refer on to the relevant agencies. It was explained by one German student that in Germany the roles of the different authorities (police, social worker, teacher) were not so clearly differentiated as compared to, for example, Northern Ireland. There were differences of opinion as to whether the child should be approached without parental involvement or consent, again reflecting the child centred or family centred intervention practices of the countries represented. .

### **Vignette N: Rough Handling and Aggressive Attitude**

Students rated the mother’s rough handling of a sick child as medium to low risk. They generally expressed difficulty in making a judgment as to the level of risk because of the limited information available and questioned the reliability of evidence from the third party

who reported this incident. For some students the concern focused on the indirect implication in terms of the child's self-confidence and self-esteem or that the mother may physically hit the child at home which would place the child in potential danger. The students engaged in a debate as to how the mother-child relationship, in the context of this incident, should be interpreted:

“Personally I think the relationship between mother and child is seriously dysfunctional and dangerous for the child. The child is still very young and still needs lots of attention and tenderness from his mother. It can be fatal for the child's future life. There is a huge need for help especially control of the mother and maybe parental control/help.” (German Student).

Some students felt that the child should be treated with warmth and love after such surgery and that this situation should not happen as it is detrimental to the child's wellbeing. One student commented that the mother “should create a warm and safe situation, but she is hard-faced...I think is emotional abuse” (Polish Student). Other students, however, endeavoured to interpret the mother's behaviour in terms of parental stress given the context of the incident:

“...I'm still feeling unsure about how to judge. I could imagine that having her little child getting surgery in hospital is a big challenge...Perhaps she feels very uncomfortable and has already had bad experiences with doctors in hospital and now she doesn't know how to handle her feelings...This is just to explain her behaviour not an excuse for it. I'm not sure if social work interventions are justified based on this small information.” (Northern Irish Student).

Student opinions differed as to the level and type of interventions that were appropriate. There was a concern as to the possible negative consequences of intervention and students cautioned against an insensitive response. There was a feeling that intervention could be justified on the basis of helping the mother to “cope with her parental responsibilities” (German Student) aimed at improving her skills in interacting with the child. Different strategies were shared by the students. In Germany, social workers are able to video record the interaction between parents and children so as to inform appropriate interventions whilst, in Northern Ireland, the family could be referred under legislation to a family assessment centre where a specialist team of social workers help the mother with issues such as stress management, attachment and the development of emotional warmth. Differences between the German and Northern Ireland

context were again highlighted in students' debates as to whether this vignette justified social work involvement. In Germany the state would require additional information to justify social work intervention whilst in Northern Ireland the information presented was considered sufficient to act upon.

Students discussed the social work role in terms of conducting an initial assessment, highlighting problems and providing support which may "help the mother cope with her parenting responsibilities" (Northern Irish Student). Suggested social work interventions included leaving leaflets about local education counselling centres, or going to the home and talking to the mother about her situation, and arranging for the child to stay in hospital longer. It was suggested that in Germany there would be little or no response to this this vignette:

"In Germany we would say the best is to try and keep children as long as possible in their families or at least in their close surroundings. In my opinion there aren't enough good alternatives, because it's too expensive to have the child in homes or there aren't good enough qualified persons." (German Student).

### **Vignette P: Parental Alcohol Abuse**

Students generally felt that that this vignette involved a high level of risk and that it was the most 'risky' of the three cases. Students suggested that this case involved a potentially fatal combination of abuse and neglect and questioned the capacity of the mother to parent and supervise the child given her alcohol dependency. As a consequence students favoured an interventionist approach given the child's vulnerability in this situation.

One student stated that due to her 'alcoholism' the mother was not able to fulfil her parental duties. German and Polish students tended to feel that the child should be taken from her mother and looked after by her grandmother or alternatively placed in foster care:

"The youth officer has to get the girl out of this domestic environment as fast as possible. Meanwhile the mother must get a therapy and should get her little girl back only when she is permanently sober so that she is able to take care of her daughter responsibly." (German Student).

Students suggested the mother receive some form of intervention including alcohol detoxification, psychotherapy, social work counselling, and inpatient hospital and rehabilitation treatment. Most students agreed that the child should be removed from the home almost immediately:

“The responsible social worker should consider if the child could be accommodated at its grandma’s place or a foster care or a children home. It would also be important to give the child some therapeutic help in order to enable the child to learn how to handle the situation with its mother and to help her learn to trust in adults and especially in its mother again.” (Polish Student).

The involvement of a grandmother was seen as a strength in this family scenario and a way of reducing the distress and damage to the child. One student suggested that the approach should encompass a whole family orientation as opposed to focusing either on the mother or the child:

“To remove the child without identifying an appropriate family/friends carer could exacerbate any vulnerability the mum is facing, and may make the child more aware of the seriousness of the situation (a situation she regards as normality). Might the following help? To identify a temporary carer (family-grandmother) for a period Monday-Friday. Some one-to-one work with mum and child initially, followed by family -focused sessions aimed at mum’s understanding of the impact of her apparent addictions problems on her child.” (Northern Irish Student).

Students debated the implications for the child if the mother was placed into treatment and generally agreed that regular contact between mother and child should be encouraged so as to promote the mother-child relationship.

## **DISCUSSION**

Whilst it is impossible to make any generalisations from these findings, there are some interesting observations that warrant further discussion. The debates that took place within the online discussion fora help to highlight different student orientations to the understanding of risk assessment; ‘a child at risk’ and ‘a risk to the child’. The notion of ‘a child at risk’ denotes a definitive status or diagnosis that demands some level of protective intervention

whereas ‘a risk to the child’ is a much broader concept that encompasses the potential for a range of specific factors to place a child in a state of risk. Students tended to make judgments on the vignettes presented based on one orientation or the other. The notion of ‘a child at risk’ reflects a strong child protection orientation whilst ‘a risk to the child’ reflects a broader ‘child welfare’ orientation involving prevention and the provision of supportive services (Parton 2011). The findings suggested that students vacillate between different orientations reflecting the earlier noted nuanced approaches in international child welfare systems identified by Gilbert et al. (2011).

Overall, students tended towards an interventionist approach, but also recognised the need to take time to consider the steps involved in the assessment process and the need to further investigate. Perhaps this interventionist tendency reflects their status as novice practitioners compared to expert practitioners who are able to draw on practice wisdom and experience to inform their judgment. Comparisons were made between the Northern Ireland and German child protection contexts as to social workers’ ability, or lack of ability, to intervene on the basis of suspected risk or the presence of potential risk factors although this comparison is tenuous and requires further investigation. Students differed in their opinions as to the type and extent of investigations required before rating a case as high risk. Some students took a more global approach to the assessment and investigation process whilst others were very focused on risk.

Fora discussions highlighted students’ different opinions and attitudes towards parental alcohol misuse and the sexualised behaviour of young children. Different cultural approaches and attitudes to early sex education became evident in the discussions highlighting the highly contextual nature of risk. Descriptions of child protection practices and professional involvement differed across the countries represented by the students. Teachers and school principals appear to be given a role in the first line response and investigation role in response to reported child abuse in some European contexts. Students from Northern Ireland appear to have a clear notion of their responsibility under the legislative framework whilst, in Germany, students operated under broader professional principles. These themes, reflected in the qualitative analysis, are tentative and there were also variations within countries. As will be further acknowledged below, this was a pilot study with a relatively small number of participants in each group.

## **Lessons Learned and Implications for Social Work Education**

An important aspect of learning from the project was that, in relation to the content of social work courses, there was a lack of baseline information across all three countries about what teaching students in the different countries had received in relation to risk. This information would have been useful in terms of analyzing student discussions in relation to the three vignettes. The project also demonstrated some of the difficulties with engaging students in activities that are not part of their assessed teaching (Crisp & Lister, 2002). Although most of the students did participate in some way, there was considerable variation in the level of engagement and we can only speculate that, because involvement in the fora was not aligned to any academic assessment outcomes, some students were strategic as to how they used their time. This suggests that different strategies to engage students could be explored and that it may be more effective to link such international projects to some aspect of assessment. Limited participation by some students in the discussion fora may also have reflected the lack of confidence that some of the German and Polish students experience when having to communicate in English as a second language. Students may also have been additionally wary of participating in an online forum where they may perceive their contribution to be more open to criticism and where any contribution is recorded in contrast to a conventional tutorial discussion. As well as these more unusual aspects of the fora, it should also be acknowledged that participation may also have been influenced by the same range of factors that may impact on participation in general, for example, commitment to the course, levels of preparation, anxiety about involvement, previous experiences of involvement and wider factors in the students' lives.

As educators we may have a tendency to think that all students have knowledge of, and are comfortable with, negotiating social networking platforms. Online discussion fora can, however, unintentionally disengage students if the process is complicated or time consuming. The German University discussion platform proved to be difficult to navigate for some students and the physical requirement of having to register and navigate a new site may have demotivated some of them. There were also some technical difficulties for students accessing and using the online discussion fora. The potential for the use of new technology, especially to facilitate contact, discussion and learning across countries is exciting and extensive but it is important to acknowledge that there is still a need for preparation when using new tools and that an unpredictable array of complexities that can arise. The instructions provided for students both for the use of the fora and on the nature and scope of the tasks could also have

been clearer. The task, for example, required students from different cultural and welfare contexts to summarise their opinions on each of the vignettes within a group forum. This appeared, however, to result in a virtual form of ‘group think’ as students attempted to highlight the similarities in their perception of risk rather than the differences. ‘Group think’ refers to the tendency for groups to suppress difference and make more extreme decisions than individuals. This was originally explored in the context of high level foreign policy decision making (Janis, 1982), but then also found across a wide range of groups and subjects (Sunstein, 2000) and more recently on social media (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). This may also relate to the reluctance of students to participate and when they do to express views which challenge or disagree with others although, for social work students, these are crucial skills to develop.

An overlapping point in relation to the use of technology is that the format of the discussion fora used, which was an exclusively written exchange with no set times for contributions, was not especially interactive. It did allow students to exchange views and perspectives but it may have been more interactive if it had been structured to allow them to do this in real time and possibly via some form of video conference/discussion rather than in the written format. There is ongoing debate and exploration about the relative merits of face-to-face and computer mediated communication (Jonassen & Kwon, 2001) and there doesn’t appear to be a one size fits all solution beyond the need for sufficient preparation and support for whatever combination of media are used (Monteiro & Morrison, 2014). There may also be other factors, such as gender, which influence engagement with these formats for interaction (Kimbrough, Guadagno, Muscanell, & Dill, 2013).

The project also highlighted the importance of providing students with the opportunity to reflect on the experience, to assess their own learning and comment on how useful they found this international experience. Critical reflection is a central aspect of social work education and practice (Fook & Gardner, 2012) so to build in more structured opportunities for this in the project would have strengthened the design. This would also have helped inform how such projects could be further developed in the future.

### **Limitations**

This is an exploratory pilot using selected universities and the results cannot be generalized to other students, educational facilities or countries. However the findings may potentially

highlight similarities and differences in the way in which students from different European contexts perceive risk, which in turn has implications for social work teaching, learning and practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

Discussion fora and email groups are well established methods for facilitating interaction and this article explored their use to explore social work students' perceptions of risk across three countries. The use of online discussion fora has the potential to make international social work real to students. It does, however, require careful coordination and attention to cultural and educational differences. Involving students from three European universities in a discussion of vignettes involving concerns about children was at the same time inspirational and frustrating for the educators involved. The process and tool described provided students with a rare opportunity to explore the similarities and differences in national perceptions of risk within the convenience of university discussion fora.

Students appeared genuinely curious in relation to learning about how social work is practised in different countries. The challenge, however, was to capitalize on this initial motivation and provide an incentive for students to complete the tasks involved. Greater recognition of the strategic way in which students prioritise their learning is required to address this challenge. There is a difficult balance to strike between: sufficient assessment; standardisation of assessment; individual interests; opportunities to develop critical thinking; and students' concern about assessment outcomes (Cleak, Hawkins, Laughton, & Williams, 2015). Participation in the discussion fora facilitated peer to peer learning concerning the different socio-cultural and political contexts and welfare structures across Europe in which social work is practiced. The qualitative findings from the discussion fora suggested cultural and contextual differences between students in relation to the concept of risk to children. We presume, rightly or wrongly, that the subtle differences between students' perceptions of risk reflected the cultural and legislative context of their current educational experience.

Further research is required to assist students to positively analyse differences across European systems. This type of deeper learning (Biggs, 2003) is not easily achieved in a classroom setting. Important questions as to the most effective ways of developing and integrating discussion fora as a tool for intercultural education for social work students remain. Their

accessibility and flexibility remain challenging indicating that the potential of alternative digital options, such as web conferencing, should be explored.

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## TABLES

	<b>No Risk</b>	<b>Very Low–Low Risk</b>	<b>Moderate Risk</b>	<b>High-Very High Risk</b>	<b>Mean Rank*</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Germany</b>	1 (2%)	11 (22%)	19 (38%)	19 (38%)	54.70	<b>50 (100%)</b>
<b>N. Ireland</b>	0	0	13 (29%)	32 (71%)	83.51	<b>45 (100%)</b>
<b>Poland</b>	0	7 (17.5%)	13 (32.5%)	20 (50%)	65.89	<b>40 (100%)</b>

\* Kruskal-Wallis Chi-Square = 14.252; df = 2; p = 0.001

**Table 1: Student Assessments of Vignette H by Country**

	<b>No Risk</b>	<b>Very Low–Low Risk</b>	<b>Moderate Risk</b>	<b>High-Very High Risk</b>	<b>Mean Rank*</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Germany</b>	1 (2%)	19 (38%)	17 (34%)	13 (26%)	57.01	<b>50 (100%)</b>
<b>N. Ireland</b>	0	12 (27%)	22 (49%)	11 (24%)	64.44	<b>45 (100%)</b>
<b>Poland</b>	0	8 (20%)	10 (25%)	22 (55%)	83.98	<b>40 (100%)</b>

\* Kruskal-Wallis Chi-Square = 12.088; df = 2; p = 0.002

**Table 2: Student Assessments of Vignette N by Country**

	<b>No Risk</b>	<b>Very Low–Low Risk</b>	<b>Moderate Risk</b>	<b>High-Very High Risk</b>	<b>Mean Rank*</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
<b>Germany</b>	0	8 (16%)	19 (38%)	23 (46%)	54.91	<b>50 (100%)</b>
<b>N. Ireland</b>	0	2 (4%)	12 (27%)	31 (69%)	68.47	<b>45 (100%)</b>
<b>Poland</b>	0	1 (2.5%)	6 (15%)	33 (82.5%)	83.84	<b>40 (100%)</b>

\* Kruskal-Wallis Chi-Square = 13.688; df = 2; p = 0.001

**Table 3: Student Assessments of Vignette P by Country**