Dynamic Risk Factors: Scientific Kinds or Predictive Constructs

Tony Ward, PhD, DipClinPsyc
Tony.ward@vuw.ac.nz
Key Papers


Dynamic Risk Factors

Variable risk factors and causal risk markers: dynamic risk factors with latter being called “criminogenic needs”

• Distinction between static and dynamic risk factors reflected in current assessment practices and in goal of risk reduction.

• The recruitment of dynamic risk factors to formulate cases and to inform treatment is now standard clinical practice
Dynamic risk factors are predictive constructs not explanatory concepts.

Failure to realise this has placed us in research and practice dead ends.

However, there are ways out, if........!!
Dynamic risk predictors (dynamic risk factors) are ones in which assessed change is associated with subsequent criminal behaviour. (Andrews & Bonta, 2010, p.27).

In other words, they are viewed as potential causal factors that if effectively targeted by cognitive behavioural techniques will reduce reoffending rates.
Mann et al (2010) argue that risk factors are plausible partial causes of sexual offending and predict reoffending.

Propose that most strongly supported variables should be emphasized in both assessment and treatment of sexual offenders.

*Emotional regulation problems, deviant sexual interest, offence supportive attitudes and beliefs, general dysregulation problems, and social intimacy deficits.*
I think this is completely wrong!

There is a conflation of

- **Prediction**: risk management
  
  **AND**

- **Explanation**: case formulation and intervention planning

**NB**: DRFs do not genuinely refer to any specific thing; they are more like summaries.
Problems with Dynamic Risk factors

- If term is treated as referential but has no referent, then one is reifying terms that have no other function than that of providing a descriptive summary of a distinct set of processes and attributes. For instance, one then comes to treat a name for a group of test items as if it were a common cause of the item responses. That of course is a mistake. (p.158)

- If no attribute answers the referential call the test is not valid for measuring that attribute no matter how useful the test may be for prediction, selection or how well it may fulfill other functions. (p.158)

- Boorsboom (2005)
Problems with Dynamic Risk factors

Dynamic risk factors are unable to function as explanations of offending because:

(1) **Composite constructs** comprised of multiple, sometimes conflicting causal elements:

Problems with Dynamic Risk factors

- (2) Contain a *mixture* of putative causes, states of affairs, and problematic cognitive, affective, behavioural and social states associated with crime;

- *EG: Relational style:* (Thornton, 2013) a mix of events, mental states, psychological processes, and social states of affairs.
Inadequate Relational Style
- Dysfunctional self-esteem (inadequate or narcissistic)
- Emotional congruence with children

Lack of Emotionally Intimate Adult Relationships
- Lack of sustained marital type relationships
- Relationships marred by violence/infidelity

Aggressive Relational Style
- Callousness
- Grievance Thinking
Problems with Dynamic Risk factors

- (3) They are partly *normative* and therefore are as much social and cultural concepts as scientific ones.

- *Link with recidivism reveals partly defined with respect to legal norms.*

- *Ethical norms at stake as well (assumption is that when criminal laws are broken individuals and members of the community are significantly harmed).*

- **THUS:** not straightforwardly causal constructs
From Risk to Causality

• Bradford Hill (1965): reasonable to infer that a risk factor is a cause of a disease if it is consistent with the following guidelines:

• (1) a strong association with an specific outcome
• (2) consistency (e.g., place, circumstances, time, and observers)
• *(3) specificity (e.g., to particular groups, body systems and sites, and diseases)
From Risk to Causality

- (4) temporality (a putative cause precedes outcome)
- *(5) biological gradient (e.g., expect decrease in effect with decrease in cause)
- *(6) plausibility (i.e., is the cause reasonable within the context of current knowledge?)
- *(7) coherence (i.e., does it cohere with knowledge about the domain?)
- *(8) experimental (evidence)
- *(9) analogy (i.e., the existence of other similar causal relationships).
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

• Where to from here?
• Is there a way to utilize DRF’s despite their lack of “existence”
• By doing so meet Bradford Hill’s guidelines?
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

- How best to use DRF to inform research and practice?

- Take lead from recent work on trans diagnostic mechanisms and the Research Domain Criteria in psychopathology domain (Ward & Fortune, in press).

- The classification and treatment of offence associated psychological and social states should be based on our best theories of core psychological processes and their causal interactions.
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

- Two types of concepts in the DRFRF (Ward & Fortune, in press):
  - (a) Causal processes: negative affective systems, positive affective systems, cognitive systems, intrapersonal social processes, self-regulation systems & interpersonal social systems
  - (b) Levels of analysis (data): biological, behavioural, phenomenological & relational
- Purpose of data collection is to provide evidence for the causal processes.
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Emotional congruence with children refers to feeling that relationships with children are more emotionally satisfying than relationships with adults. The offender who is emotionally congruent with children may find children easier to relate to than adults, may feel he is still like a child himself, and may believe that children understand him better than adults do. He often feels himself to be “in love” with his child victims, as if the relationship was reciprocal. (Mann et al., 2-10, p. 201)
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework (EC)

- **“Symptoms”** (arising from contexts and causes)
  - Feelings of fear and anxiety
  - Engages in courtship/grooming behavior
  - Avoids adult intimacy and relationships

- **Situations** (e.g.,)
  - Contact with children
  - No adult romantic partners
  - Activities with children
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

- **Causal Processes:**
  - *Negative affective systems:* views adults as threats and employs avoidance strategies to manage fear and anxiety;
  - *Positive affective systems:* views children as sources of reward and more likely to provide him with love, sexual pleasure and care. Likely to seek out opportunities for engagement with children;
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

- **Cognitive systems**: displays attentional bias towards signs of affection from children or indicators that it might be possible to become involved with them sexually and emotionally (e.g., cues signifying vulnerability, lack of supervision);

- **Intrapersonal social processes**: tendency to view himself as vulnerable and unsafe, living in a dangerous world; he lacks understanding of his motives due to expectancy and interpretational biases;
Dynamic Risk Factor Research Framework

- **Self-regulation systems**: lacks the capacity to soothe himself and effectively control negative physiological arousal; seeks interaction with children to do this and constructs elaborate grooming strategies to accomplish this based on problematic beliefs and goals;

- **Interpersonal social systems**: dysfunctional internal working models in which affiliation seeking strategies are entirely directed towards daily interactions with children, including sexual contact. May also belong to deviant social networks that approve of adults having sex with children.
Possible to analyse emotional congruence with children into different types of causal processes, contexts/situations that interact to generate ‘symptoms’, feelings of fear or loneliness etc.) evident in individuals who feel emotionally drawn to children.

Thus: view DRFs as instigators of inquiry (markers of causal processes etc) rather than as endpoints of inquiry.
1. Researchers and practitioners need to stop using DRFs as explanations of offending that directly inform assessment and treatment of individuals who commit crimes.

2. Practitioners should formulate cases in psychological terms drawing from relevant psychological, aetiological, and treatment theories.

3. Myopic for policy makers to assume that there is little more to correctional interventions than the employment of behavioural technology.
Conclusions

- Dynamic risk factors are boundary riders that indicate offence related phenomena & possible causes within a specific domain.

- DRFRF can be used to translate this information into deeper, coherent explanations & more streamlined and precise intervention strategies.