

Governing families: Problematizing technologies in social welfare and criminal justice

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At only just over 120 pages, this book is a relatively quick read; however, its brevity does not indicate a lack of depth. Instead, what Rosalind Edwards and Pamela Ugwudike do is explore how families are governed today through recent technological advances and carefully elucidate the social (in)justice ramifications. The ground covered here is vast, from biologisation to artificial intelligence; however, readers should not be put off, as the authors carefully explain how these issues link to work with, and policy about, families.

Edwards and Ugwudike begin by discussing how families are governed in neoliberal states. While this material should be familiar to most social workers, the authors update this story with recent and worrying developments in neoliberalism and the turn to authoritarianism in many Western countries. They explain that they are concerned with how 'objects' (like families and the people in them) are constructed, and (drawing on Bacchi (2013)), they ask what the 'problem' is presented to be? Each subsequent chapter then considers these questions and applies them to several critical case studies.

Given our recent change in government, the questions posed by Edwards and Ugwudike are critical. How does our new government define (construct) the notion of family (and

therefore determine what counts and what is a 'good' or a 'bad' family), and what do they think the problems facing families might be? The latter question is critical as, for example, positioning 'ram raids' and 'truancy' as parental problems neatly avoids macro issues like poverty, racism, and colonisation, and determines what sort of interventions might follow. If parents are the problem, fines for parental failures and remedial parenting education are appropriate interventions.

The authors' framing questions provide a springboard to explore how family governance has, in the last few decades, seen an intensification in parental responsabilisation. Anyone who has read some of Rosalind Edwards' earlier work, particularly her co-authored book, *Challenging the Politics of Early Intervention: Who's Saving Children and Why* (Gillies et al., 2017), will be familiar with this content. In this second chapter, they follow the thread of family governance through four case studies, ranging from the 19th-century Charity Organisation Society to UNICEF programmes dominant in the Global South. Here, the authors show that, while parental, particularly maternal, responsabilisation, is the common thread, such discourses have ramped up in recent years.

In Chapter Three, the authors explain how recent advances in child development

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knowledge, particularly neuroscience, are used to justify increased governance of families. In making this argument, they are not saying that neuroscientific and biologically based knowledge is irrelevant; instead, they trouble *how* relevant it has become in parental and family governance. Here, the questions about objects and problems become critical. If parents are constructed as being able to alter the neuro-functioning of their child (and therefore future adult citizen) and thereby avoid ‘adverse childhood experiences’, then governments have a vested interest in ensuring that the *right* neuro-functioning is secured, thus optimising citizens and minimising government expenditure on (future) dysfunctionality. Early intervention in children’s lives (and therefore parenting) becomes essential and a matter of government (and fiscal) importance.

Chapter Four extends ideas about biologisation and early intervention into discourses of risk and explores how families are being constructed as a risk to society (versus being at risk *from* society). Again, this neatly inverts responsibility. If families are a risk to society, they must be closely governed until they no longer pose a threat. This responsibility inversion stands in stark contrast to the notion that governments put families *at risk* through neoliberal and authoritarian policies designed to hide structural oppressions. This responsabilisation is akin to how Māori are positioned as costly (and thereby risky) to the state through the repeated presentation of negative statistics in various government reports while ignoring the cost of the state to Māori through colonisation (a tactic that is intensifying under the new government). This chapter is particularly relevant to anyone working closely with families, especially those in child protection and youth justice.

The final, analytic, chapter concerns how artificial intelligence is being deployed in the governance of families. Edwards and Ugwudike carefully explain the challenges

of using such technology in this area, highlighting known problems with racist and classist outcomes of using artificial intelligence. Readers should be reassured that there is no in-depth complex discussion of computational and algorithmic logics. Instead, the authors carefully explain how these technologies may appear to be scientific and neutral but, instead, replicate and even intensify existing inequalities. The critical case studies used here—in child protection and youth justice—should be an alarming wake-up call for anyone involved in family work. Readers who have followed the development of such technology, especially algorithms, may have already heard of the Allegheny Family Screening tool, a tool that (infamously) was initially developed here in Aotearoa New Zealand (Ballantyne, 2023).

It is here that I think social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand should pause. While social workers are not known for their technical wizardry and computing skills, this is not an area we can afford to ignore. The ramifications of artificial intelligence in social work practice (and beyond) are worrying and are a crucial area for social justice advocacy and activism. The rush by many companies to demote human intelligence in favour of artificial intelligence must be resisted in an area as complex and multi-faceted as people’s lives. Given, as the authors point out, that wealthy families are more able to hide their data from state surveillance (through private providers), data used to construct predictive programs tend to over-predict poorer families as a risk to the state. Racialised families, especially Māori and Pasifika in the Aotearoa context, are overrepresented in the ranks of the financially poor, so this means that the (white) gaze of the (colonising) state narrows its scope even further. In an environment where the new government is cutting costs, it is not too much of a leap to predict that they may look to artificial intelligence as a cheaper and more ‘effective’ way to govern problem families and ‘deliver outcomes’.

In the face of such a gloomy, looming future/present, where do Edwards and Ugwudike leave us? They remind us that the governance of families is not new; it might have new tools, but the underlying idea of responsabilising families for societal conditions predates neuroscience and computers. Here is where I think social workers, and I think the authors would agree with me, need to focus their energies. We may not be mathematicians or neuroscientists, but we are experts in social justice (and injustice). Therefore, social workers should pay careful attention to the alternatives the authors discuss in their concluding comments. Here, they note the growing data-justice movement, especially those centring Indigenous data sovereignty. Perhaps it is here that social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand can explicitly link this work to their own *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019), which centres Te Tiriti as the foundation of our practice.

Reviewed by **Eileen Joy**, University of Auckland.

Holding to and upholding Te Tiriti can mean (and should mean) questioning how the government constructs objects and problems, questioning the construction of governance, the government itself, and the whole structure of our (colonising) government. What counts and is counted matters in the numeric *and* importance sense.

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