The Sage handbook of decision making, assessment and risk in social work

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Working with risk … if ever there was a phrase which has more bedevilled social work! This handbook does not seek to resolve that issue, instead it deliberately walks a line between neither promoting risk-aversion in social work and avoiding an over-emphasis on risk.

Aotearoa New Zealand is well-represented in this very impressive list of international contributors. Emily Keddell co-edits this handbook and is, of course, well-placed to produce this book given her expertise about how we address (and, in my view, fear) risk in this country. The handbook is structured along four themes: (1) professional judgement; (2) assessment, risk and decision processes; (3) assessment tools and approaches; and (4) developing and managing practice.

Within the professional judgement section sits our first chapter from local voices. Tracie Mafile'o and Jean Mitaera write with Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi in "Collective cultures, risk, and individual judgement" about the value of Pacific (and Indigenous) social work approaches. What came through very clearly was that Pacific-led responses are founded on group decision-making and that social workers must recognise the cultural collective process of the Pacific.

Through examples from other research, the authors remind the reader the power that social workers have should be used for the benefit of others. More importantly, the authors recognise that, within Pacific culture, it is the elders who hold power and lead the decision-making process—but then how does a social worker work in that dynamic? Through humility, through relationships that genuinely seek to understand the stories the family hold and the wishes the family strives for. The authors offer a cultural humility framework while a discussion of the two domains again directs the reader to the need for respectful, trusting, and honouring relationships. The authors make compelling arguments that through these processes can the power within collective decision-making strengthen social worker assessments.

My view is that the chapter also (inadvertently) challenges the terminology within the wider handbook around "professional judgements" (of which there is an abundance). If we are to decolonise social work assessments and decision-making, then perhaps principled judgements might replace professional judgements. That might be some way of meeting the authors' hope of moving Pacific-Indigenous approaches from the sidelines in "professional" judgement discourse. In the recent and excellent *Tu Mau* issue of this journal, the editorial noted that Pacific social workers "often find themselves in spaces of resistance, reclaiming and reframing for themselves, their families, and the Pacific communities they work with" (Crichton-Hill et al., 2023, p. 1). My hope is that this chapter goes some way to recognise the valuable contributions Pacific social workers make and the value of Pacific social work.

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In stark contrast to that approach which values relationships and humility is "The devil in the detail: Algorithmic risk prediction tools and their implications for ethics, justice and decision making" by Emily Keddell. This, it should be recognised, is written for an international audience and the local discerning reader will no doubt be familiar with Dr Keddell's research warnings of risk prediction tools in Aotearoa New Zealand. Who could forget the crest of the "risk prediction by algorithm" wave in 2015 when (some have argued, in a stopped-clock moment) the then Minister of Social Development blocked an observational study of 60,000 babies to identify those at risk of child abuse, with a stroke of her pen: "not on my watch! These are children, not lab rats" (McLean, 2015, para. 9). Many of us exhaled, but Dr Keddell has remained vigilant.

This chapter contains an interesting discussion about how algorithmic tools work and the issues in using them in child protection, but I found all of these were best summed up (but the author would argue as incomplete, I suspect) with her concern that "decisions that become data points used in algorithmic tools are also subjective and variable" (para 11). When the author discusses the experience of social workers in using predictive tools, I found myself thinking "if only they could read this chapter, then there would be very little appetite for using them"… but the expertise on display here could possibly make this argument a little inaccessible for some. I hope not, because Keddell delivers a vastly more knowledgeable but no less scorching "not on my watch" to the social work world. Notwithstanding that small observation, with the imminent return of 'Social Investment' this chapter is critical reading for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There are a couple of honourable mentions to make. I found the interdisciplinary chapter "Legal aspects of decision-making process in social work" to be of interest. Written by a medical doctor and an attorney, their analysis of risk assessment in the court system provided an important non-social-worker insight about social work. But what caught my attention more than anything was their view that "trial lawyers know and employ the power of storytelling" (para. 27). What struck me was the confidence of lawyers to celebrate being able to move between professionalism (again, a frequently used word in this handbook) and storytelling, yet my experience is that social workers might be guilty of trying to prove their professionalism by avoiding storytelling. In this regard, the chapter by Dr Laura Cook titled "Intuition in social work practice" was a welcome inclusion. An unapologetic and important piece of work advocating for knowledge born of relationships and connections.

I reflect on what this handbook has made me consider. The subjectiveness of the algorithm being seen as a safer alternative to the subjectiveness of social worker knowledge. The power of the social worker above the humility of the Pacific approach. Structured and evidence-based knowledge placed ahead of intuition. Professionalism, whatever that means.

This handbook demonstrates we have (more than) enough knowledge to be brave in our decision-making. The question remains whether social work will to be brave enough in our assessment and decision making to acknowledge risk rather than to react to it. We should back ourselves.

References

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