

A political history of child protection: Lessons for reform from Aotearoa New Zealand

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Understanding child protection requires of us, indeed *implores* us, to understand our history. It is through historic and contextual analysis that we can understand how we got here, and then, intelligently (read *not reactively*), build on this knowledge for further reform. Politicised and criticised, many of us who work inside child protection can only gain when we engage sociologically with “a political history of child protection” in and for Aotearoa. This exciting book is indeed timely.

Ian’s book provides a sophisticated and accessible politico-class analysis intersecting with the Tiriti o Waitangi and significant Māori calls for change. Taking a post-colonisation chronological overview into the neoliberal turn, a critique of managerialism is provided that reminds me of why social work must remain at the core of child protection mahi and organisations. Ian highlights the long calls from Māori trying and challenging (with little progress) in turning the ideological tanker. Ian argues that poverty is “the elephant in the child protection room” and he shows us why sociological skills and theorising are requirements for working in and leading child protection. This is a bold book. Challenges are laid down: this being my favourite—are we in “denial about the complex intersections between child maltreatment and structural inequality?”

Ian writes himself in and this is a delight to read. Drawing on his practice and leadership experience gives the book an authentic and legitimate quality. Interspersed with

core ideological and political arguments, the weave is a success. The seas of child protection are indeed choppy and stormy.

Setting out the core argument across seven chapters, the book takes us from 1840 to the present day. We are taken on a journey through political and ideological influences with a compelling argument made and about liberalism and indigeneity being thrust tighter together with poor outcomes for society’s most vulnerable. Emily Keddell’s stunning work is drawn on to highlight how inequality serves adverse functions for those in need of support and help (Keddell, 2018, 1019). Entering the child protection vortex is indeed easy, for some more than others. The final chapter offers a thorough sociological analysis of the last few years of reviews and reports. This was my favourite chapter—with so many public and critical reviews in the past 3 years, Ian provides a thematic synthesis and reform analysis.

The book begs the question: Why are child protection systems so subject to ideological influence and quickly adopted dogma, thrusting us toward reactive change? Given our obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and a range of internationally agreed rights-framed conventions, how did the recent “social investment approach” that exacerbated a child-centric individualism take hold? (Chapter 6 offers a splendid critique). I loved the sociological imagination presented as a leadership and practical toolkit for sense making this “political history”.

The vision of bicultural social work was clearly derailed by managerialism influences

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throughout the 1990s and beyond and the book details why, and to what affect. Social work education is not immune to the market forces playing out in these (endless) neoliberal times.

Perhaps more focus on the actual practice on the ground would have enhanced the book. How might practice frameworks, tools, and models enable us to provide a more unified, yet stronger, ethical social work offer? Too often child protection operates behind closed doors in privatised and silencing ways.

The paradigm shift ideas (Chapter 7) are more illustrative than instructional—how might we actually achieve a paradigm shift in our child protective systems? The Israeli reform illustration is probably the best-known example and more lessons from this work would have augmented the core argument that a paradigm shift is needed (Krumer-Nevo, 2020). There is something quite compelling about the argument for a paradigm shift to underpin systems and organisational change. These days “risk” gets a bad rap, with risk-saturation and “moving beyond the risk paradigm” needing a more sophisticated treatment and the book offers this (Featherstone et al., 2018). The state’s role going forward is not in isolation and, as Ian argues, the need for intelligent systems reform is compelling. This book offers a significant contribution to this end.

The political and discursive analysis weaves in poverty and inequalities with sophistication. Ian’s work is accessible and challenging. It is through the analysis laid out in the book that social workers and leaders can be equipped to speak up and speak back to structural determinants that can oft feel too hard to tackle. It is through a deepening understanding of how we got here that we can collectively offer new ways to organise our systems of help. The trope of “statutory social work” has done us a disservice, and this book provides

a compelling argument for a collective and strong *social work* discipline operating across a range of settings. Imagine. Families don’t want too many cars up the driveway—they deserve the very best social work has to offer—from a statutory service, community agency and iwi.

Social work students, kaimahi in practice settings, and leaders of practice need to buy and read it. It is by understanding history and contextual influences that we can stand, pause, and plan forward. Too often, as Ian argues, practice reform has lurched from crisis to crisis, from ideological dogma to the next new idea. So many well-intentioned reforms were left to flounder.

This is an outstanding and helpful book. My work is part of the team designing the new practice approach for Oranga Tamariki and we are adopting a paradigm shift, to be delivered through the new practice framework (Stanley et al., 2021). Keeping practice reform on course, in choppy and stormy seas, is challenging. This book is a resource we are drawing on to help us move forward. The Aotearoa New Zealand child protection story will continue.

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