Will they do it again?: Assessing and managing risk

Edited by Ken McMaster & Leon Bakker
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Reviewed by Andrew Frost

We live in anxious and fearful times. Much of the world, it seems, is on permanent Orange Alert and consumed with the detection and neutralising of risk - risk to profit, risk to reputation, risk to life, limb and well-being. And it is an infectious posture. Meerkat-like, the presence of threat is passed on down the line, across borders and throughout social systems. Often its source is not concretely identified, framed in abstract terms as anything from internet websites to international terrorism.

Here in the domestic world of Aotearoa New Zealand the warnings have arrived. The importation into state services of risk paradigms from the discourses of criminology and commercial business now pervade our criminal justice system and social services. Our human service organisations seem to be abuzz with talk of risk. Threat, it seems, is now everywhere. (When did you first hear the terms “home invasion” or “gated communities” applied to contemporary New Zealand?) Subsequently the terms, “risk”, and, more latterly, “high risk”, are afflicted by a kind of semantic inflation whereby they are applied so liberally they appear to be losing meaning. Those charged with making risk assessments for the safety of individuals and the community are susceptible to a disproportionate fear of getting it wrong. Under the pressure of public scrutiny fuelled by media promulgation, a less feted “risk”, but one with its own unique problems, is that of over-prediction.

This environment has prompted a scurrying to harness recent advances in the sophistication of actuarial measures (those based on statistically-derived tables) in order to calculate risk. The term “calculate” is used advisedly here, of course. Social workers, psychologists and others may feel they are increasingly turning into actuaries themselves. They carefully tabulate the number of previous offences, age at “onset”, categories of offence, and so on, in the hope of establishing a defensible scientific and quantified justification for decisions affecting the relative liberty of those with whom they work.

Regardless of the matter of the “real” level of threat and the question of technologies for detecting it, risk assessors are confronted daily with immediate practice issues. Should a contrite and forgiven parent continue to live among the family whose members he has shoved and punched? Is it prudent to recommend release from prison for the individual who has compliently undergone rehabilitative “treatment”, or the grandparent whose last known sexual offences were committed 21 years previously?
Ken McMaster and Leon Bakker’s text on the assessment and management of risk appears against this background. They marshal contributors who share a wealth of experience in teaching, managing and practising in the New Zealand context, and charge them with the task of confronting some tricky issues in fields of criminology, social work, and psychology.

The book’s contributors come from a range of human service fields and approach the task in different ways. As the reader, this added to rather than detracted from my understanding; the multiple perspectives affording a richly dimensionalised sense of the subject. However, in terms of the structure of the book, I sometimes had a sense of being tossed about from chapter to chapter by the various contributors’ assumptions about risk as a construct. For this reason, I would have liked to have seen an early, scene-setting chapter dealing polemically with the definitions of risk and its domains, providing a conceptual lens through which to view the chapters to come. Nevertheless, I found it otherwise to be usefully structured, with the final two chapters focussing on the preparation of risk assessors in the New Zealand human service context.

Most contributors acknowledge that the science of risk prediction is in its infancy. Actuarial approaches rely on the application, to an individual case, of data derived from very large groups. This raises difficulties. While we might be able to say that Mr “X” is a member of the category of previous offenders that has a 40% likelihood of re-offending over the following ten years, we would be much less confident in being able to predict the circumstances, the victims or type of the new offending. This is where the art of risk prediction and, hence, risk management, becomes critical. Predictions based on actuarial measures are blunt instruments. Conceptualising and, therefore, managing risk more realistically requires the application of theory. We need to be able to establish a valid conceptual understanding of the individual and his life and circumstances to “join up the dots” of our predictive technologies. This involves acknowledging the agency of the persons and resources available in a given case, as well as the quanta of an individual’s history.

It is fair to say that, on the whole, this book is concerned more with the science than the art of addressing risk. That said, I was impressed with what struck me as a sensible and balanced approach to the application of the science. Caution is urged in the use of actuarial instruments, with constant reference to the importance of weaving clinical acumen with the circumstances and context of the case.

Many dilemmas of the field are confronted: whether future behaviour is most reliably based on past behaviour; the care-versus-control paradox; the pros as well as the cons of exposure to risk; whether we determine risk in terms of likelihood or severity; how to provide the least restrictive management environment; the potential for risk labels to result in self-fulfilling outcomes. These matters are addressed in satisfying and helpful ways.

There are some areas that suffer from limited attention. The systemic and tailored consideration of contextual factors in assessment receives some deliberation but more would have been welcome. Similarly, I hoped for more on the potential for productive engagement of persons as clients in a collaborative process of risk assessment. As a
social worker, perhaps the most notable deficiency for me concerns the relatively small space given to a systematic incorporation of the aspirations, competencies and resources available to those who are the subjects of risk assessment. However, as well as ample material on populations at risk, predictive instruments and estimation systems, there is adequate consideration of risk as a dynamic and fluid phenomenon and of prediction as an intervening factor in work with clients.

The arrival of this book might be viewed, in part, as a response to the anxieties of a risk-averse ethos. Alternatively, it could be seen as a timely contribution to the literature, with particular significance to the New Zealand context. For whatever reason, it is likely to attract a substantial New Zealand readership in the field on account of its relevance to current concerns. Overall, such readers are likely to be well rewarded. It is a comprehensive and helpful compendium of current thinking on the matter of assessing and managing risk. As a handbook, guidance for application in particular fields of practice is provided authoritatively. As well as a practical guide, the book also succeeds in adequately educating the reader to the state of the art of risk prediction and management.

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