Book Review

Working with Risk: Skills for Contemporary Social Work
Hazel Kemshall, Bernadette Wilkinson, Kerry Baker
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Reviewed by: Matthew Hall, Nottingham Trent University, UK

Mapping, contextualizing and illustrating the key aspects of risk that a professional social worker may encounter in work-based settings and contexts is a difficult undertaking. More so, if the intended audience are practitioners and students who require a book written in a succinct, clear and accessible style. The outcome is a major accomplishment, making Hazel Kemshall, Bernadette Wilkinson and Kerry Baker's book both an indispensable learning and teaching resource.

Written in a reader-friendly and accessible style the book is organized into eight parts beginning with an overview of risk. Subsequent parts cover risk assessment, decision making, planning and management, ethics, risk evaluation and the self in an organizational context, culminating with the authors' conclusions. 'Real life' examples and activities derived from both research and practice compliment core themes and implications throughout. These examples clearly illustrate that risks are multifaceted, and the linking of theoretical perspectives with practical examples will provide invaluable help to practitioners and students developing and honing key skills.

Inevitably, targeting a broad, non-sector specific, social work audience necessarily means some depth of discussion was sacrificed in favour of scope. Whilst the authors do try to engage with risk scenarios for specific individuals, families, groups and communities (e.g. substance users, the elderly, child-protection services, mental health) the specialist reader might be left a little wanting (see Hothersall and Maas-Lowit's, 2010 edited volume). Yet

regardless of the specific environment and context in which decisions are made, the authors' focus on the fundamental influences of personal emotions, values, attitudes and biases in the risk taking and decision making process is, in my opinion, one the book's major strengths. In addition, the book also excels in its coverage of practitioners' ethical dilemmas such that the right of the service user to control their own life must be balanced against the risk they may pose to their own and other's health and safety. Whilst such dilemmas are a necessary aspect of social work the authors point out that professionals need to embrace these positively rather than shy away from them if optimal outcomes are to be realised. One reason ethical dilemmas are feared is the current climate in which risk decisions are taken.

The book is published at a time of intense media and public scrutiny of social work professions in response to some high profile service failures, meaning 'risk avoidance' is increasingly favoured by institutions and individuals at the expense of 'risk-taking'. The text provides clear examples of this throughout, such as the child being allowed to play outside (un)supervised. Challenging this trend, the authors clearly identify the benefits of some risk-taking and indeed, they advocate giving clients ownership and involvement in some risk decisions. The underlying imperative of social work, the authors argue (citing Carson & Bain, 2008, p.31), is 'professional risk-taking is undertaken for the benefit of others from a duty to assist them' (p. 4). Whilst this is undeniably key, equally important is that risk-taking decisions are also taken for the benefit of the practitioner's safety, given physical and emotional violence by clients toward social workers in the majority of settings is increasing (Laird, 2013). Like many texts, which examine risk, service professionals' and users' needs are not attended to equally. This book is no different. Admittedly, a dual focus may not have been the authors' intention and so it will necessarily be unevenly weighted. However, the relative absence of discussion on practitioners' safety, in my opinion, represents a missed opportunity and indeed, risks presenting an unbalanced perspective of risk decision making

and management to students and newcomers.

Despite these omissions, the book provides a well-organised and comprehensive discussion of the issues surrounding risk in social work settings and contexts. Hazel Kemshall, Bernadette Wilkinson and Kerry Baker's efforts will hopefully inspire other social work scholars to take up the challenge of providing specific and comprehensive discussions of this important and essential topic.

References

Carson, D. & Bain, A. (2008). *Professional Risk and Working with People*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Hothersall, S. and Maas-Lowit, M. (eds.) (2010). *Need, Risk and Protection in Social Work Practice*. Maidstone: Learning Matters Ltd.

Laird, S. E. (2013). Training Social Workers to Effectively Manage Aggressive Parental Behaviour in Child Protection in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Social Work*, March 10: 1-17.