



**Book Review of “At Risk: Social Justice in Child Welfare and Other Human Services” by Karen J. Swift and Marilyn Callahan, 2009, Toronto: University of Toronto Press**

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The newest book by Canadian social work scholars Karen Swift and Marilyn Callahan is exemplary of how other disciplines can invigorate social work theory. “At Risk” uses child welfare practice as an entry point for exploring the continuing movement away from addressing needs and towards the management of risk in the human services.

In “At Risk”, Swift and Callahan tease apart the managerial panopticon of the modern child welfare system. That is, the web of surveillance in which families are monitored by child welfare workers who are under the observation of their supervisors; who must answer to regional supervisors; who are accountable to the ministry; which is accountable to the state; which is under the scrutiny of the media; which is assiduous in ensuring that the stories of children who die while in care are never far from the headlines.

The task of this book is not to assign blame for the tragic occurrence of harm done to children in care. Nor is it to undermine the importance of preventing harm to children. Instead “At Risk” leads the reader to consider how the child has been isolated as a unit outside of the family. This concept of the child, defined entirely by its need for protection against a world of risks (especially those posed by the family environment), has created a system that operates as an emergency service instead of a universal welfare provider. As Swift and Callahan demonstrate throughout their book, there is nothing universal about risk at all. Individuals are classified as risky based on their race, class, sexuality, age and gender and risk is embodied differently at the intersections of each of these social demarcations. As the authors argue along the same lines as Chen (2003), viewing child protection as a constant crisis necessitates an empirical approach to quantifying and predicting this thing called risk. The authors enter their field of study by analyzing the risk assessment tools adopted as technologies of child welfare.

Epistemologically, the authors do not limit themselves to one perspective. They see evidence of both modern and postmodern regimes in the welfare state. They also make use of postmodern approaches for example, those of discourse, surveillance and contextuality, yet they ultimately conclude along with Leonard (1991) that “there are features of the modernist project that should be retained and re-emphasized if a new kind of welfare is to be achieved” (p. 228).

The book is similarly non-committal when it comes to theory. The authors do not limit themselves to one theoretical perspective, or even two for that matter. Rather, they select the most useful concepts from various approaches to risk as presented in the first chapter.

Following Lupton (1999), Swift and Callahan scan disciplines to highlight three theories. The first is Beck's (1992) sociological 'risk society'. The second, Mary Douglas's (Douglas, 1992) anthropological 'Cultural Theory of risk'; and the third, unsurprisingly, is Foucault's philosophical notion of 'governmentality' as continued by Rose (1996) and Burchell, Gordon and Miller (1991), and applied to social work by Parton (1999) and Webb (2006) among others. However, after laying forth the various frameworks of risk, the authors decline to adopt one approach in particular. Consequently, while the book scans the landscape of risk technologies in child welfare, it is not deeply grounded in theory in the way of Chen (2003) for example. It should be noted, however, that the goal established by Swift and Callahan is not to substantiate a particular theory but to demonstrate how the concept of risk plays out on the frontlines of child welfare practice. They set out to do so methodologically by way of institutional ethnography.

The book is broken into three parts. The first part explains the concept of risk as a social construct in further detail than in the introduction before setting out to map the social context in which risk is ingrained. Chapters 1 and 2 lay the groundwork much like other social policy texts by explaining the welfare state and its current unhealthy relationship with neo-liberal ideology. The authors then move on to illustrate how this ideology supports the individualization of risk for those who fall on the unfavourable side of social divides in Canada. The authors come closest to rejecting a theory in Chapter 3 when they find that Beck's analogical argument that "poverty is hierarchic, smog is democratic" (1992, p.36) glosses over the reality that those with more material resources are better equipped to reduce their risk in all circumstances. The authors' commitment to social justice is made crystal clear when they give an overview of social inequities in Canada.

Here I might comment upon the authors' organizational choice to restrict the bulk of the explanation of their methods and methodology to an appendix at the back of the book. Personally, I think readers who are unfamiliar with institutional ethnography might benefit from a little more methodological information than what is provided in the brief introduction to Part I. I make this point because without the understanding of the great attention institutional ethnography gives to mapping the social context, one might be a little perplexed in Chapter 3 at what appears to be better suited to an introductory text to structural social work in Canada.

The last chapter in Part I illuminates how risk has been taken up in the form of risk assessment and management in the helping professions in Canada as well as the United States and the United Kingdom.

Theoretical and contextual discussions of risk as a social construct come to life in the second part of the book where Swift and Callahan present the voices of those negotiating risk everyday. The authors conducted interviews with social workers in various settings within the Canadian child welfare system. They also interviewed key insiders to the implementation of risk assessment models as well as mothers who have had substantial involvement with child welfare organizations. Swift and Callahan make no attempt to hide their feminist agenda here. This book, like the authors' prior work (Swift 1995; Callahan and Walmsley 2007), uses language as a political strategy toward engendering child welfare practice. Instead of adopting the degendered discourses of provincial child welfare policy, Swift and Callahan explicitly name the main targets of risk technologies as mothers.

Consistent with an institutional ethnographic approach, Chapters 5 and 6 take us into the domain of daily practice. This is embarked upon by mapping the socio-political conditions, which have facilitated and legitimized the need for the risk assessment model to child welfare. The authors then progress to an overview of the risk assessment instruments implemented over the past two and a half decades in British Columbia and Ontario respectively. Again, consistent with their chosen methodology, Swift and Callahan sift through the minutia of institutional life. The detail in which they document the increasingly technocratic drudgery of child protection work keeps the reader in anticipation for the participants' quotes, which punctuate the final three chapters of the book.

Through these excerpts we get an inside look into how the concept of risk, now reified by material consequences, plays out on the front lines of child protection for both social workers and mothers. Chapter 6 deconstructs the constitutive discourses and taken-for-granted knowledges concealed in the 'objective' measurement and prediction of risk. Swift and Callahan assert that child welfare is informed by white-middle class beliefs about child rearing. This point is made with resounding clarity by an Indigenous key informant who states "standardization is assimilation" (p.153). As the authors point out, much of what underlies this focus on risk is neo-liberal managerialism. The pressure to do more with less has led to the standardization of service delivery. This 'one-size-fits-all' model threatens to de-humanize human services. Professional judgment, establishing a relationship built on trust and care and the provision of support is devalued in favour of efficiency and competence with risk assessment tools. Likewise the complexity and structural struggles experienced by families are reduced to a standardized rating.

In Chapter 7 the reader is left with the understanding that risk management works by making work for those classified as risks. Complying with risk reduction case plans by enrolling in classes, making what are considered appropriate life changes, accommodating workers and all the while surviving in frequently adverse circumstances, it seems that 'risky mothers' are at least as skilled in managing professional intervention as social workers themselves. This strikes me as the most important lesson to take from the chapter as it signifies the sites of resistance for those objectified under the discourse of risk.

Part III consists of just one chapter and the aforementioned methodological notes. In this final chapter Swift and Callahan reconnect the micro-practices to the grander social environment. They do so by returning to some threads sewn throughout the book. In sum: risk is a social construct, which serves to individualize blame for structural injustices, standardizes practice, gravely threatens professional autonomy and in these ways serves the managerial regime consistent with a neo-liberal state. Okay, but where do we go from here?

Swift and Callahan draw upon Dorothy Smith's (1990) notion of power to ensure that social workers in the reading audience do not think of themselves as freestanding agents of their own agenda. Nor should we conceive of ourselves as blameless cogs in the state machine. Instead they argue along with Strega and Carrière (2009) for the forging of strategic alliances amongst colleagues in order to resist threats to the profession's mandate of providing support, acting with care and advocating for social justice. They contend that the common tendency to view one's own practice as more radical or somehow different than that of their colleagues is perhaps "a strategy to hide from themselves their own complicity with a system of which they disapprove" (p.192).

When read in its entirety, “At Risk” does belabour a few of its main points. The benefit of this, however, is that virtually any chapter could be a useful supplement to social work pedagogy. I presume this was likely a consideration for Swift and Callahan as long-time educators.

“At Risk” is a useful resource in a number of ways. First, Swift and Callahan add considerably to the social work literature that deconstructs and problematizes the hegemonic concept of risk as something inherently bad and somehow preventable. “At Risk” may also be of benefit to graduate students in the social sciences who are considering using institutional ethnography as a research methodology. Finally, the detail in which the authors trace the rise and implementation of various risk assessment technologies makes this book a good reference for those interested in documenting the restructuring of modern social work in Canada.

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