CONSEQUENCES OF A POSITIVISTIC APPROACH TO CHILD ABUSE

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DISRUPTING THE SOCIAL WORK NARRATIVE STREAM

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ABSTRACT: Within the UK’s positivistic paradigm, the belief is that data can predict human behaviour. This has led to the use of algorithmic risk prediction systems from profit making providers, including risk prediction for child abuse. These algorithms assume commonality via a fixed set of characteristics observed within an abusive family. However, our analysis of Serious Case Reviews in the UK found no fixed set of continuous variables which can predict abuse. In addition, the algorithms assume that human error (by the service provider) was at fault, assuming service user behaviour to be predictable and thus able to be controlled. A statistical dilemma is thus formed: when developing a model using familial ‘characteristics’ to estimate incidence of child abuse the model can only operate in two extremes being either: Too narrow in scope where the model will fail to match individuals who fulfil the very specific criteria resulting with false negatives; or too broad in scope where the model will match multiple individuals, but will have numerous false positives. This paper discusses the early findings of our work on risk prediction, explaining the consequences of using this positivistic approach especially with the unacceptably high number of false positives and false negatives observed in the UK’s child protection system.
BACKGROUND

Me:

• Engineer, IT Professional, Senior Management, over 21 years in Aerospace Industry
• Lawyer, Social Scientist, 7+ years in academia
• Part of a project team looking at child protection systems in the UK

Projects:

• Safer Children? (2013-2014) (UWE VC ECRG)
• Rethinking Child Projection Strategy (2014-2016) (ESRC ES/M000990/1)
• Care Cases Crisis (2017-2019) (Nuffield Foundation JUS/43090)
• Risk of Risk (2018-2020) (ESRC ES/R00983X/1)
POSITIVIST PARADIGM
REDUCTIONIST

SIMPLE (BUT…..)
SHOULD PEOPLE BE TREATED AS ‘LAB RATS’?

• In ANZ, Social Development Minister Anne Tooley halted an experiment which would have seen 60,000 children monitored for two years to see if they were abused. [https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/70647353/children-not-labrats--anne-tolley-intervenes-in-child-abuse-experiment](https://www.stuff.co.nz/national/health/70647353/children-not-labrats--anne-tolley-intervenes-in-child-abuse-experiment)
ALGORITHMIC RISK PREDICTION

• Algorithmic risk prediction is increasing in many sectors.

• Works very well, in well defined systems like aerospace, nuclear, medicine, etc.

• However, social systems are by nature ill-defined, multi-factorial and difficult to measure.

• Pressures on Local Authorities:
  • Increased CP & Safeguarding referrals
  • Reducing Local Authority budgets
  • Promotion of neoliberalism by central government

• But is this a good thing?
CHARACTERISTICS

• Most CP risk models assume that abusive families share common characteristics.

• Models derived from germ theory.

• General population characteristics compared with those of the target groups and differences used as ‘risk indicators’.

• Risk factors are generally marginal between target and general populations giving high false positives (~97%) and worryingly high false negatives (18% missed abuse cases) (estimated numbers)

• At best these characteristics are indicators but they are not proof and are over used.

• Combining risk factors leads to risk scores but these are misleading.
CONSEQUENCES

• Welfare view: “we are doing the best we can with the best tools available”

• BUT, doing the best you can is not good enough when the consequential harms that result are so great.

• Refer too many ‘low risk’ families into the CP & S system ➔
  • Waste resources ➔ less to provide help/support
  • Overloads system ➔ missed abused children

• High error rates for intervention ➔
  • Intervening in low risk families ➔ unnecessary harm (false positives)
  • Missing abused children ➔ continuing harm (false negatives)
OUR FINDINGS:
ANALYSIS OF SERIOUS CASE REVIEWS (SCR)

• Our analysis found no fixed set of variable in UK SCRs (800+) which help to predict abuse.

• The extremes found in SCRs gave poor predictive input due to being swamped by confounding factors.
**ERRORS:**

**HUMAN OR ALGORITHM**

- Human we are wrongly applying tools because they are cheap and attractive.
- Errors are however assumed by the service provider (Social workers, LAs, etc.)
  - blame ➔ risk aversion ➔ refer/intervene if in doubt

**WHY?**

- Misunderstanding of the positivist approach and its limitations
- False belief that we have to tools and processes that CAN predict and detect child abuse
- More complex than acknowledged
FUTURE WORK TO ADDRESS:
STATISTICAL DILEMMAS

- Use of familial characteristics to predict abuse result in:
  - Too narrow which fails to match those at risk → false negatives → Harm to children
  - Too wide which includes large numbers of families → false positives → Harm to families
- Trial and error with children and families is not acceptable
- NOT a panacea

Risk of Risk project (1\textsuperscript{st} Dec 2018 – 2020)
- Apply rigorous statistical and predictive tools to CP models
- Aim to clarify the issues and set the boundary for their ethical use.
- Recommend a way forward.
CONCLUSIONS

• Risk prediction is not a panacea. It requires a well defined system

• Diverting resources to technological solutions is (IMO) currently wasted money

• Risk prediction is overloading the current workforce and doing more harm than good

• A true positivist approach require rigorous evaluation and in CP&S we are not yet there.

• Every false positive and false negative causes harm