Falling in love outwards: Eco-social work and the sensuous event: — Source link ⤢

Stanley Houston, Mel Gray

Institutions: Queen's University Belfast, University of Newcastle

Related papers:

- Phenomenology and the Social Sciences: a story with no beginning

- The "Naturality" of Alfred Schutz's Natural Attitude of the Life-World

- Figuring Flesh in Creation : Merleau-Ponty in Conversation with Philosophical Theology

- The phenomenological turn in education. The legacy of Piero Bertolini's theory

- Taking Responsibility into all Matter: Engaging Levinas for the climate of the 21st Century

Falling in love outwards: Eco-social work and the sensuous event

Document Version:
Peer reviewed version

Queen's University Belfast - Research Portal:
Link to publication record in Queen's University Belfast Research Portal

Falling in love outwards: Eco-social work and the sensuous event

Abstract

Summary: Social work is a discipline that focuses on the person-in-the-environment. However, the social domains of influence have traditionally received more attention from the profession compared with the impact of the natural world on human well-being. With the development of ecological theories, and growing threats to the environment, this gap has been addressed and now the notion of eco-social work is attracting more interest. This article builds on this corpus of work by exploring, and augmenting, the thinking of the philosopher, David Abram, and his phenomenological investigation of perception, meaning, embodiment, language and Indigenous experience. The implications for eco-social work are then addressed.

Findings: The development of Abram's philosophical thesis is charted by reviewing his presentation of the ideas of the European phenomenologists, Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. It is argued that Abram uses phenomenology to explore the character of perception and the sensual foundations of language which, in Indigenous cultures, are connected with the natural world. A gap in Abram's thinking is then revealed showing the need to set human perception and language within an understanding of power. Overall, this re-worked thesis is underpinned by a meta-narrative in which ecology engages with philosophy, psychology and Indigenous experience.

Applications: By grounding such ideas in Slavoj Žižek's construct of the sensuous event, three applications within social work are evinced, namely: (i) reflecting on the sensuous event in social work education; (ii) rekindling the sensuous event with Indigenous Peoples; and (iii) instigating the sensuous event with non-Indigenous populations.

Key words: Eco-social work, philosophy, Indigenous experience

Introduction

It is axiomatic that we depend on the natural environment to sustain life. Yet, the catastrophic events at Chernobyl (and elsewhere) remind us that human beings have the capacity to change their surroundings irreparably. Even though many techno-centric interventions yield short-term benefits, they also precipitate long-term, deleterious outcomes, including acid rain, an escalating carbon footprint, an indubitable green-house effect, global warming, environmental degradation, deforestation, interminable flooding, anomic urbanization, bio-decline (rather than biodiversity), transnational corporate hegemony, drought, and worsening inequalities. Should this instrumental approach to nature continue unabated, one could be forgiven for conjecturing that the earth's ecosystem is lurching towards a calamitous, apocalyptic end – not unlike that depicted so graphically in Cormac McCarthy's dystopian novel, *The Road*.

What role should social work play in helping the victims of these tumultuous social and environmental changes and their negative impact on inner meaning? Moreover, how can it contribute to ecologically vibrant experiences or *events* that enrich emotional, social and spiritual well-being? This article attempts to build on a growing corpus of work addressing these vital questions. Such thinking constitutes a paradigm shift that attempts to explore the nature of eco-social work in the modern, globalised world.

In making this contribution, the authors embrace a phenomenological analysis of experience and meaning. This type of inquiry reveals the multiplicity of world views, including those evinced by Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, it deals with the language of poetry, metaphor, myth, symbolism, allegory, chimera, and archetype: the lexicon of the transpersonal. It is the 'ground' of our 'being-in-the-world'. As the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962)

surmised, it is only through the idiom of poetic language that we get glimpses of 'being' in its truest sense. This turn towards phenomenology is vital if we are to deepen our understanding of ecological events and their implications for social work.

In this article, we appropriate the phenomenological ideas of David Abram (1997) in his evocative, poetic, mesmeric work, *The Spell of the Sensuous*. In this text, Abram creatively fuses European phenomenology, environmentalism and indigenousness to evince a rich meta-theory linking perception with ecology. Using this conceptual alignment, Abram attempts to determine the nature of deep experience, perceptions of reality and how they are enlivened by culture. Although a few social work commentators (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003; Gray et al., 2008; Gray & Coates, 2011) have made tacit references to, or drawn on some of the ideas underpinning *The Spell of the Sensuous*, a comprehensive exegesis of the text (from the academy) has yet to take place.

Having explored Abram's core ideas, we then consider what they mean for eco-social work. However, by way of context and to set the scene, it is important to explore, firstly, the conceptual antecedents to eco-social work. It is necessary to review this context as a new paradigm of thinking about the natural world is emerging in social work scholarship: one that is eclectic, syncretic, radical, transgressive, and interdisciplinary.

The Development of Eco-social work

Attempts within social work to understand the inter-connection between the 'person' and the 'environment', and to apply it to practice, have remained a challenge for the academy. Early on, systems theorists (for example, Pincus & Minahan, 1973) having been inspired by Parsons' (1951) seminal, structural-functionalist theory, and von Bertalanffy's (1968)

generalist model of systems integration, focused on the need for holism in social work. That is, the person as a system was indelibly linked to wider social and environmental spheres. It followed that social workers should acquire relevant psychological and sociological knowledge to work effectively with individuals, families, social groups, and organizations. However, although enhancing practitioners' awareness of the social domain (and thus countering the intra-psychic myopia concomitant with a narrow psychodynamic approach), systems theory was highly abstract and therefore somewhat detached from the real, social and natural worlds.

Responding to this gap, later developments within this genre took an ecological turn. One prominent example was Germain and Gitterman's 'life-model' approach (1980). Here, the ecological focus was helpfully extended to an appreciation of the life-course, stress, resources at the individual's disposal, the impact of power, the influence of natural habitat, and temporal and spatial considerations. Other iterations of ecological thinking in social work subsequently began to flower. One prominent example was Meyer's (1983) eco-systems perspective which claimed to be more flexible than the life-model approach because it drew on a range of explanatory theories. Here, aspects of general systems theory and ecological precepts were synthesized into a unifying conceptual framework. According to Meyer, systems were labile and came together in a dynamic, transactional way giving rise to multi-layered cause and effect outcomes in the environment that defied simplistic, reductionist explanations. In making this meta-theoretical case, though, the perspective did not give enough attention to social diversity.

Such concerns were ameliorated, in part, by Matthies et al.'s (2001) eco-social approach. The ideas presented resembled a kind of grounded, eco-criticality: one highlighting how systemic

4

interaction gave rise to various socio-economic and environmental contradictions and asymmetrical power relations. Another example of this move was eco-feminism (Gaard, 2010). Here, attention was given to the suppression of women's concerns for the social and natural worlds, how gender sometimes impacted on relationship in a misogynist way, and how female dispositions of caring, nurturing, cooperating, and reciprocating were essential to building more sustainable environments.

Yet, in spite of these progressive developments, 'one of the persistent criticisms of social work's conventional ecological systems perspectives has been their rather narrow interpretation of the environmental construct' (Besthorn, 2013, p. 176). Simply put, an inordinate focus had been placed on the social spheres occluding a fuller understanding of the bio-physical environment. This might be explained, in part, by the presence of a Manichaean, ontological dualism in Western thinking. This separates out the psycho-social and material realms viewing them as discrete and distinct rather than having contiguous, porous, boundaries that meld in co-dependency.

Coates (2003, 2005) has responded to this gap arguing that not only will the environmental devastation of the *natural world* impact deleteriously on ecological sustainability but also on people's psycho-social well-being. He made a clarion call for a paradigm shift to overturn this lacuna based on integration, the sanctity of the natural order, the importance of diversity, and community action – one which was inclusive, holistic, supportive of environmental sustainability, and spiritually-oriented. Besthorn (2002) also entered the debate at a paradigmatic level challenging Western conceptualizations of *individualized*, self-identity and positing a radicalized form of self in its place, one irrevocably embedded in nature. Elsewhere, Besthorn (2011) extrapolated the notion of 'deep ecology' to environmental social

5

work. His thoughts connected with those of Abram's because they both contended deep ecology was primordial. For the, the concept connoted humanity's essential connectedness with nature.

A raft of thinkers (early, mid-term and late) have engaged with this new direction in theorizing an environmentally conscious, eco-social work (for example, Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Ungar, 2002; Hawkins, 2010; Dominelli, 2012). Importantly, some contributions have been pitched at the axiological level of values and principles. Thus, Peeters (2012) argued that there was a normative concurrence between the values of sustainability (for example, the satisfaction of human needs) and social work (for instance, the promotion of human well-being). A value-consensus of this kind could be mutually reinforcing and provide the basis for alignments with social movements, building social capital and empowerment. Peeters was right to start with essential value positions as actions often flow from core beliefs. If we start from the ontological premise that the world is inexorably interconnected, we will understand that damaging the 'other' and the material world, means damaging ourselves. Inflicting harm on anything, whether human, animal or material, is like throwing a hot coal: in the process I burn myself.

Gray and Coates (2012) have also entered the debate at an axiological level. Searching for a moral stance, they articulated a new framework for environmental ethics based on Besthorn's notion of deep ecology (referred to earlier), eco-feminist ideas, the need for pragmatism, and, finally, the place of social constructionism which saw the environment through a cultural lens. These ethics were complemented by Miller et al.'s (2011) approach which promulgated different aspects of environmental justice as a core axiom grounding them in legal and policy directives that protected the environment and Indigenous cultures.

To conclude this section, if the old paradigm of ecological social work has been found wanting and a new one is beginning to take shape, as viewed through conceptual and axiological lenses, then an ontological perspective on environmental social work may well be timely and complementary. Abram's thesis provides one illuminative departure into this territory.

The Spell of the Sensuous

David Abram is a philosopher, ecologist, and performance artist. In his lyrical, landmark, text, *The Spell of the Sensuous*, he sought to articulate some of the fundamental reasons why the human mind had largely disconnected from the 'more-than-human-world', how it had lost a primordial, sensual awareness of animals, plants and the material realm. His aim, in all of this, was to re-orient our perceptions and sensual understanding of nature and wider ecology, so that we would viscerally 'fall in love outwards', in order to mitigate environmental decline and disaster. This objective was also about re-capturing the dismissed, yet arcane, wisdom of various Indigenous Peoples (the endangered and vanishing ones), whose perceptual alignment, reciprocity, and linguistic engagement with their environments created a deep respect for all things not human. Crucially, according to Abram, the Indigenous mindset viewed the natural order as an *animate* sphere, one that was living, breathing, and suffused with meaning. The well-being of the human psyche, it was contended, depended irrevocably on imbibing the sentience of nature rather than commodifying it rapaciously for material gain.

In order to take this project forward, Abram turned to the work of two founding thinkers within the discipline of phenomenology: Edmund Husserl (1962) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty

(1996). Phenomenology was concerned with the way in which the world made itself evident to human awareness or consciousness, the manner in which 'things first arose in our direct, sensorial experience' (Abram, 1997, p. 35). It derived from the study of direct, (inter)subjective, lived experience of the surrounding *phenomenal* world. It was so-called because it treated everything as *phenomena*. In his early work, Husserl saw this as an entirely subjective experience – the experiencing self or subject being the centre of study such that we could arrive at the 'pure consciousness' as it posited and pondered various phenomena.

However, Husserl's emphasis on getting to the nub of pre-conceptual, sensory experience was contested as it was seen as solipsistic, that is, conveying the notion that the self was the only reality that could be proved. If subjective reality were a solitary experience existing only in the mind of the solipsistic individual, or subject, how were we to know anything objective about it? How were we to recognise the sensual reality of other experiencing selves? To deal with this criticism, argued Abram, Husserl (in his later work) developed the idea of 'multiple subjectivities' in the field of 'appearances'. Hence, the phenomenal field was a collective landscape, a veritable 'lifeworld', constituted by other experiencing subjects as well as one-self. On the one hand, there remained *my* experiences, *my* imagination, and *my* dreams while, on the other, shared common experiences, which Husserl called *intersubjective* phenomena, that is, phenomena experienced by a multiplicity of sensing subjects who, nevertheless, each experienced them subjectively. Through inter-subjectivity, the world was apprehended as an interlacing matrix of shared meaning, sensation and perception.

The primacy of intersubjective experience, in shaping meaning, was also extolled by Mead when he developed his theory of symbolic interaction in social life (Mead, 1967). For Mead, actors continually perspective-take. That is, they put themselves in the position of others to

anticipate their responses and, on the basis of this reflection, mould their behavior accordingly. More than that, they consider what is appropriate social behavior by taking on the perspective of a generalized other. In this way, they connect with what they see as societal expectations about the roles they need to perform within social groups. Interestingly, Weigert (1997, p. 16) builds on these Meadian precepts by introducing the neologism of the 'Generalized Environment Other':

'Just as social interactionists note that individuals think of themselves…in terms

of a generalized other…so, too, I argue that in an ecological age we are learning

to think of meaning in terms of the anticipated responses of the environment as a

generalized natural other'.

By adopting this inter-subjectivist stance, Husserl and Mead challenged Descartes' separation of mind from the surrounding material world. This notion had led proponents of Western science to observe, in a detached manner, (what was considered to be) a separate, determinate, measurable world: one that could be quantified and later commodified when the forces of modernization, urbanisation, and industrialization took hold. Thus, the 'disinterested' sciences had overlooked the subject's commonplace, taken-for-granted perceptions of the world around her. *Contra* this move, Abram suggested (in a Husserlian moment) that the world was an 'open and dynamic landscape subject to its own moods and metamorphoses' (p. 32) – a landscape that people engaged with sensuously.

Yet, the idea of a fully immersed, embedded subject in the *natural* world remained under-theorized in Husserl's unfolding development of phenomenological philosophy. What was needed was a more refined, radicalized notion of the participatory nature of perception.

According to Abram, Merleau-Ponty rose to this challenge. For him, our identity as human beings was expressed though our *embodiment*. We were physical objects, first and foremost, each with a unique location in space and time. Merleau-Ponty was interested in the world of direct, immediate *sensual* perception, which preceded knowledge. So, central to his philosophy was the identification of 'the subject' – the experiencing 'self' – with the bodily organism.

Critically, for Abram, Merleau-Ponty saw the human 'body-subject' (the elemental power of the flesh) as an active, open form, continually improvising in its relations to the world, ceaselessly adjusting itself to a shifting terrain. It was not a genetically programmed machine. If it were, it could never come into genuine contact with anything outside itself, never perceive anything new and never be genuinely startled or surprised. While we might have some predispositions or 'instructions', the whole of our experience, and the exact time and place in which it took place, could never be predetermined. Through our receptivity and creativity we opened ourselves up to the world, like the bud of the flower unravelling to reveal its beauty, through the process of perception. This often happened outside of our verbal awareness giving rise to the centrality of pre-conceptual, pre-theoretical, and pre-linguistic experience.

Through the act of perception, we engaged with the world, time and space, seeing some things, overlooking others. In short, perception was the conduit between the person and the world, a mutual intercourse between the body and its outer environment. It was in the bodily, sensory experiencing of the world that we established and felt a sense of reciprocity or mutuality and reverential connection with all that existed. This is a notion easily understandable to a photographer or any aesthete. Objects invite you into their world. They

attract or repel you. Beautiful objects can possess you and you mourn the loss of them. You feel empty without them. Here, perception is more than visually seeing: it is also hearing, touching, feeling, smelling, and tasting. In grounded experience, these senses merge into one overarching sense impression - an experience known as synaesthesia. For Abram, this was an integrated aesthetic experience common to many Indigenous Peoples.

Abram then built on these foundational, phenomenological precepts, by turning to an examination of language or, in his vernacular, 'the landscape of language'. Simply put, language flowed from sensuous experience and perception. Essentially, we did not learn language conceptually but instead corporeally. More significantly, for Merleau-Ponty and Abram, language was primarily expressive of sensory experience with one's environment and thus much more than a system of abstract signs with accompanying syntactic rules. Utterances, and the meaning they conveyed, were ingrained in physical gestures concerning the impact of the world around us. Echoing the calls and cries of the earth, Indigenous, oral cultures embodied this elemental use of language, potentiating the person's sensuous life.

However, in the modern world, argued Abram, both our language and sensuous life became disconnected from the world. Language, subjectivity, and perception no longer reflected our reciprocity with nature but instead conceptualized it as inert and mechanical. As Westerners, we were raised in cultures which asked us to mistrust our immediate sensory experience and to orient ourselves linguistically to an abstract, objective reality known primarily through quantitative measurement, technological instrumentation, and other exclusively human involvements. For Abram, this turn of events was one of the primary causal factors giving rise to the current ecological crisis. His explanation for why this occurred centred on how early phonetic writing had developed. Antediluvian, ancestral paintings, it was claimed,

constituted a primitive form of pictorial writing. Notably, they reflected a participatory use of perception to represent animals and the natural world.

However, with the advent of the Hebrew and Greek alphabets, a fissure opened up, distancing human subjectivity from nature. Instead of focusing on pictorial representations of non-human entities, the alphabet directed our attention to abstract vowels and consonants. Whereas pictorial symbols in Indigenous cultures conveyed a symbolic, representational meaning of animals, plants, and geological landscapes, the evolving alphabets reduced meaning to signature phonetic characters devoid of any sensuous connection with organic life or the phenomenal world. Such an occurrence was compounded by the forgetting of 'air'. For Indigenous Peoples, 'air' was a sacred, omnipresent medium that suffused and enriched all of nature and being. It connected people to their environment. Without 'air', we would be unable to exist, think, and crucially, speak. According to Abram, the ancient Hebrews used the 'air' when expelling their breath, to intone sacred words for the numinous. It was therefore elemental to creation and the corporeal world. As humans *forgot* the connection between breath, air, and speech, they internalized human awareness and lost their link with the sensory world as directly experienced.

So, to recap, Abram had sought to answer why human beings had become dislocated from the animate earth in order to explain the ecological crisis facing the world today. His thesis emphasized the development of perception, language, and writing: how they lost their sensuous moorings in the natural environment. Fundamentally, for Abram, to be fully human meant that we must be in right alignment with the world. In making this radical claim, Abram acknowledged that he was not seeking to offer a total theory for environmental decline. Instead, he addressed the problem from a particular philosophical perspective. Other

explanations could have focused, *inter alia*, on the development of agriculture, the industrial revolution, the appropriation of instrumental rationality or explored the world's ever-expanding, inter-country trade. All of these factors have had a formative bearing on the health of the environment.

For us, though, the disregard of power is a major omission in Abram's thesis, fecund as it is. Clearly, different expressions of the inner world of perception must be analysed in terms of the power relations they embody (Bourdieu, 1977). Thus, while we fully support the vital utilization of phenomenology (and its outpouring in language), as a key lens for viewing the ecological crisis, it is clear that both Husserl and Merleau-Ponty neglected to explicitly theorize how power shaped human perception, inter-subjectivity, and the 'lifeworld' (Habermas, 1971); nor did they consider how power framed meaning in relation to the natural environment. There is merit in the argument that our ancestors were sensuously linked to the more-than-human world (in a way in which both were enriched), but it is also the case that human *interests*, over time (for example, relating to gender, race, class, religion, and nationalism), have profoundly shaped the nature of human subjectivity and how people interacted within their 'lifeworlds' (Habermas, 1971). Dominant groups utilize power to realize their interests and, in doing so, often suppress, supplant or exclude subaltern ones, including the Indigenous populations to whom Abram refers. Importantly, this insight is only beginning to be explored fully by the systems and ecological theories in social work that were described earlier (Payne, 2014).

On a wider plane, perception and language in the modern world have been indelibly shaped by power-saturated ideologies and discourses emanating from the domains of the state, culture, and politico-economy. One need look no further than the current neoliberal world

order where mass consumerism moulds the person's intentionality and thinking dispositions inexorably: a mental colonization operating globally (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 2000). This is reflected in the way people quite often talk the language of the market economy and popular culture in an habitual and one-dimensional way (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Marcuse, 2002). In this context, certain types of language reflect an instrumentalist mindset, which social actors adopt to maximize personal gains through the most expedient means possible (Habermas, 1987). One notable effect of this mindset has been the plundering of the Earth and its natural resources (Adorno & Horkheimer, 2002).

That said, bringing an awareness of power to the fore in no way contradicts Abram's thesis but rather enriches it. Other social theorists have augmented phenomenology by drawing on an understanding of power. For instance, Dorothy Smith blended a Marxist, feminist understanding of power with phenomenology in her theorization of institutional ethnography (2005). To restate the argument: perception and language are central to human experience and are therefore cardinal to the question of ecological threat and decline. That much is unassailable. Nonetheless, they do not occur in a neutral vacuum. Power is omnipresent, circulating in every transaction and all possible spheres of social life, not always as negative and constraining, but often enabling (Foucault, 1980). We are now in a position to return to the subject of eco-social work with this enhanced understanding of the connection between perception, language, power, and the natural order.

Implications for Social Work

Under this section, we will explore the implications of the foregoing thesis for social work. This analysis is encapsulated under the following sub-headings, namely: (i) reflecting on the

sensuous event in social work education; (ii) rekindling the sensuous event with Indigenous Peoples; and (iii) instigating the sensuous event with non-Indigenous populations. As can be seen, the notion of the 'event' is the axial principle around which the various strands of this inquiry revolve. It was the Slovenian social theorist, Slavoj Žižek (2014), who recently gave it a renewed salience, philosophically speaking. But what does Žižek mean by an 'event' and why is it worthy of examination in this context?

For Žižek, an event is synonymous with an occurrence which has intense meaning for the social actors involved. It can be a poignant experience on the existential plane: falling in love, leaving home for the first time, or living through bereavement. Or, it can occur on a grander scale: being caught up in a seismic, socio-political incident that has historical significance for the actors concerned. Events depicting the colonial exploitation of Indigenous Peoples come to mind here. Clearly, this type of event may be embroiled in power relations, struggle, and contestation. Alternatively, an event can have an aesthetic or epiphanic resonance: being captivated, for instance, by a climactic resolution of discordant themes in a classical symphony.

Critically, what happens next, post-event, is a profound re-ordering of our phenomenological understanding of ourselves, others and, ostensibly, the world. More than that, events engage our senses in a profound manner. When falling in love, we inherently want to touch the other. Aesthetic rapture invariably involves sight and hearing and perhaps synaesthesia. So, events are often miraculous, sensuous happenings that fundamentally alter our inner consciousness and perception. For Žižek, they lead to 'the surprising emergence of something new which undermines every stable scheme' (p. 6). Moreover, an event is not only an incident which happens in time and space but also something which brings about a change in the *perceptual*

frames through which we make sense of the world. As a consequence, we gain perspicuity – a deeper understanding of reality, cutting through fantasy, illusion, and the ideological fog of false consciousness.

In this process, frames of meaning, and the language describing them, become enlarged. Consequently, events have the capacity to challenge, subvert or undermine previous, taken-for-granted frames of understanding. In doing so, they thrust our attention below the meniscus of everyday perception to deeper insights about experience: a movement from 'surface' to 'depth'. At this juncture, we can extrapolate Žižek's notion of the 'event' to the eco-social context and thereby introduce the idea of a sensuous event. To elaborate further, a person can experience a sensuous event that opens up perception to the enveloping earth and to the forgotten air. Interestingly, Abram describes many such personal events in his book when he journeyed throughout East Asia. Or, more negatively, she can undergo an encounter with an urban landscape replete with broken glass, litter, and human detritus. Rather than the spell of the sensuous, these 'wasteland' events might be rendered as the violation of the sensuous.

When considering experiences of this sort, Žižek draws on Heidegger's (1962) philosophy. In the latter's later work, certain events were catastrophic. What Heidegger was alluding to here, primarily, was the interminable exploitation and destruction of the natural world through scientism and technology – all at the expense of our being-in-the-world. Mirroring Heidegger's concern, Žižek said, 'the possibility of total self-destruction was just a consequence of our relating to nature as a collection of objects of technological exploitation' (p. 32). The synergy with Abram's thesis must become evident at this point as certain kinds of 'event' (linked to experience in the environment) can invoke phenomenological reflection,

whether for good or bad. But can this notion of a sensuous event, supported by Abram's ideas, have important ramifications for social work?

Reflecting on the sensuous event in social work education

Given the preceding arguments, it is important in social work education to enable students to reflect on their past experience of sensuous events in the natural environment, whether involving service users or not, contrasting positive and negative examples. Such events might emerge from the student's early life when on holiday with parents in distant lands or when living in urban jungles in early adulthood. The aim of such reflection is to appreciate, at a deep experiential level, the impact of our natural surroundings on our mood, perceptions, senses, use of language, and general well-being – taking into account Abram's core thesis on the spell of the sensuous world. More specifically, students need to consider how these events affected their embodied responses at the time. Experiencing the dawn while on holiday might have precipitated bodily stillness, fixation and a heightened, sensory awareness. As a result, our frames of understanding might have changed. Compare this rapturous feeling with the lugubrious, inner perceptions that eventuate when entering, for the first time, a run-down, criminogenic environment where the quality of the air is poor; the body, in reacting to this type of event, wheezes and splutters, steeling itself against injury or human assault.

Writing about these events, comparing good with bad, discussing them with other students and tutors, noting changes in the essence of perception, meaning, sight, hearing, and embodied response – is concomitant with the deep phenomenological inquiry advocated by Husserl, Merleau-Ponty, and Abram. Throughout this process of inquiry, students should be encouraged to pay attention to their use of language, how these events are described, how words capture intrinsic frames of meaning. It is to also consider how relations and

asymmetries of power have shaped physical environments and our perceptions of them, whether this is through an analysis of top-down local government policy or industrial decline.

Of further importance is the reflection on how the natural world affects social integration and the events that mark them. Those witnessing the early dawn together might subsequently feel a greater interconnectedness, while those entering a neglected housing estate could well experience alienation and atomization. Such reflection and learning is meant to augment the theorization of social systems covered earlier in this paper. Moreover, this type of inquiry suggests that dominant rational-behaviourist approaches and evidence-based practice be tempered with a lived-experience understanding of the world. Constructivist interpretations of worlds moulded and shaped by languages, cultures, environments, and power-laden worldviews best fit this phenomenological view of the world. Armed with this understanding, social work students are better able to show deep empathy for service users and how the social and environmental systems surrounding them impact on their well-being.

The kind of post-hoc, experiential reflection, described above, may need to be augmented, however, by facilitating a student's direct contemporaneous *exposure* to the natural environment. Evidently, some social workers may have had limited experience with this domain having been brought up in urban landscapes. In appropriate cases, Indigenous Peoples could be involved with social work educators in planning and orchestrating such events whether as part of the traditional college block or practice placement. Involving Indigenous Peoples as partners in social work education parallels a move to involve non-Indigenous service users in designing, delivering and evaluating the social work curriculum (Duffy, 2006). It further militates against the 'false clarity' (Bourdieu, 1979, p. 52)

promulgated by some higher education institutions where a didactic pedagogical approach occludes experiential learning and real life 'felt' experience.

Rekindling the sensuous event with Indigenous Peoples

According to Gray et al. (2008), before social workers can begin to practice Indigenous social work, they must avoid misplaced attempts to apply dominant Eurocentric and Anglo-American, universalist paradigms of social work knowledge and skills to the problems faced by Indigenous Peoples. Instead, social workers need to practice in a way that is *culturally sensitive*, recognizing the uniqueness of Indigenous cultures whether in North America, Australia, China, Malaysia, India, or New Zealand. This is to collaborate with Indigenous Peoples, advocate for them, and work in a manner which promotes self-directed change, self-representation, and self-determination. We contend that social workers will better apprehend this paradigm shift once they have experienced, for themselves, the spell of the sensuous. The reflection outlined in the preceding section on social work education marks an important event in this phenomenological shift.

In line with this orientation, a central plank of Indigenous social work is a deep appreciation of the spiritual significance of the land for Indigenous Peoples. Another way of putting this is to say, 'place constitutes life in the highest ontological sense' (Gray et al., 2008, p. 52). As highlighted above, Abram's work reinforces this axiom. With this in mind, we contend social workers should support attempts by Indigenous Peoples to rekindle events which enable them to reconnect with the sacred land, the air, and mysterious sense of inter-being whether through the practice of shamanism or other rituals. It is vital here to tune into the fact that natural events generate meanings and perceptions that are captured ineluctably in oral cultures, metaphorical stories, and embodied actions.

Crucially, though, social workers need to show an accurate empathy for the loss of place, the loss of meaningful events within the natural world, the loss of the 'sensuous' itself. This loss could be categorized a form of gross, symbolic violence and is often perpetuated by power-laden events in which actors have sequestered the land, or manipulated it according to the needs of various interest groups. Indigenous Peoples need to be given the space to talk through the effects of these misanthropic events. To respond appropriately to such accounts, social workers require cultural competence and sensitivity underpinned by a respectful appreciation of a non-western world view. More than that, they must advocate for the restoration of stolen lands, the upholding of land treaties, and the implementation of human rights. Such advocacy results in politicized events: meeting with officials and other social development organizations. In all of this, 'eco-social work draws on a deep ecological awareness of our relationship with nature and makes us acutely aware of the importance of protecting and sustaining the natural environment in everyone's interests' (Gray et al., 2008, p. 258).

Instigating the sensuous event with non-Indigenous Peoples

When referring to 'non-Indigenous' peoples, we have in mind mostly urban populations who have little or no historical connections with the natural world, land, and environment. They form the populations to whom a western social worker will invariably visit in order to provide helping or protective services. It is indubitable that many such 'service users' will have minimal deep experience with natural phenomena nor been afforded the opportunity to reflect on them, as part of the social work intervention. Given this gap, we argue that social workers should augment their systemic interventions by affording service users the opportunity to experience enriching ecological events within the natural world. Abram refers

to this as a process of *reinhabitation*. Here, people are encouraged to 'apprentice themselves to their particular places, to the ecological regions they inhabit' (p. 271) or can have contact with through transport.

There are many ways in which reinhabitation can be structured. For instance, young people, deemed to be 'troubled and troublesome', might benefit from organized hill-walking in a nearby national park. The sheer physical, embodied exertion means that the rarefied air is no longer taken-for-granted. While ascending up to the summit of the highest viewpoint, the young people see, for the first time, a bird of prey hovering in the fields below. In a parallel moment, the din of their housing estates recedes to a faint memory as they hear the chattering of a nearby stream. Perhaps a pre-conceptual adumbration of a primordial solitude enters their consciousness for the first time. In a different location, a group of adults with mental health difficulties are encouraged and supported to restore a damaged habitat. Working collectively, they campaign to shut down a local factory known to pollute a nearby estuary. Their aim is to see the salmon return: a sensuous event in its own right. The act of campaigning is empowering.

In another part of the city, a group of older people in residential care are encouraged to paint or photograph local scenes of natural beauty (pastoral, bucolic, aquatic, sylvan) when the spring has just commenced. Later on, during the summer, they touch the earth when planting seeds as part of a local horticultural event. Experiences of the seasons, different changes of light and sound, moving in the environment and being mindful of the embodied sensations, enriches the older people's lives. This is akin to what the theosophist, Rudolph Steiner, referred to as Gnostic sensationalism: the ability to experience, through the senses, the

deepest truths of nature. It is a perspective adopted with people with a learning disability in many Steiner therapeutic communities throughout the world.

Social workers can support, resource, enable, and collaborate in the co-production of such events. They can also advocate and negotiate to improve urban environments, where pollution, waste, and decrepit housing militate against the spell of the sensuous. Importantly, social work must recognize the close imbrication between the social and natural orders. What occurs in one invariably affects the other. This is also to be aware of the omnipresence of power, not only in shaping human perception, but also in creating the fabric of different environments. Thus, in tackling 'limiting' power, eco-social work aligns itself with, and draws upon, anti-oppressive, critical, political, rights-based, and structural social work. In this connection, Dominelli (2012) argues cogently that 'green' social work can utilize environmental disasters to highlight structural inequalities, the misrecognition of local identities and the oppression of marginalized populations. This is a movement from environmental crises to environmental justice.

Dominelli's reference to environmental disasters is salutary and chimes with Klein's (2007) contention that such *crisis* events are used by neo-liberal power elites to opportunistically force through their economic policies of deregulation, the free market and State retrenchment. Klein used the example of Hurricane Katrina to support her argument. In the aftermath of the disaster, the State introduced a widespread reform of secondary school education, essentially privatizing what had hitherto been a mainly State-funded and organized form of educational provision. The 'shock' of the crisis event opened up a window for change that could be strategically manipulated given the presumption that oppositional forces would be at their weakest point. As a result of such changes, inequalities in educational opportunity began to

emerge, and the poorest members of the community began to suffer. According to Klein, profiteering replaced public service.

Given this insight, social workers need to be consciously aware of how neo-liberal doctrines, causing cleavages in income and well-being, can be forced through following cataclysmic environmental events. Attempts to 'shock', 'storm' and 'norm' new and, ostensibly hegemonic, fiscal policies can be countered expeditiously through what McDonald (2009) views as the three hallmarks of critical social work practice, namely: (i) *critical analysis* – attempting to theoretically understand the dynamics of the neo-liberal accumulation and acquisitive system and its impact on the environment and human subjects; (ii) *critical reflexivity* –apprehending how power shapes identity and leads to status subordination, misrecognition and injustice; and (iii) *critical politics* - galvanizing collective action to lobby and advocate for those most affected by environmental disaster.

Social workers, in embracing the afore-mentioned principles, must work to develop solidarity and subsidiarity amongst and between oppressed groups moving beyond individualistic approaches and promoting methods such as self-directed groupwork (Mullender and Ward, 1991) where service users are encouraged to take action for empowerment. Even though the neo-liberal context places stringent controls of accountability and governance on social workers, they can still find spaces and gaps to break out of mainstream bureaucratic practices, and creatively explore opportunities for activism (Smith, 2007).

Conclusion

In the modern world, civilization has lost its way, has turned in on itself, cut itself off from the breathing earth. Yet, indigenous narratives remind us of the indelible and insuperable

reciprocity between nature and human beings: an 'earthly reality that is a single seamless system of interacting dynamics and ever-forming and reforming parts' Weigert (1997, p. 15). This truism forms the crux of eco-social work, a growing perspective within the field. We have argued in this paper that eco-social work can be enriched by Abram's phenomenological approach to the natural world but only when set within an appreciation of power. The emphasis Abram gives to perception, meaning, sensation, embodiment, and Indigenous experience, through the works of Husserl, Merleau-Ponty and others, provides an impetus to fall in love outwards, in order to heal not only human consciousness but also the animate earth.

In addition, we have used Zizek's notion of the 'event' as a conceptual stepping stone to link Abram's philosophical premises with eco-social work. In doing so, we have arrived at three fundamental applications pertaining to social work education, social work with Indigenous Peoples and, lastly, social work with non-Indigenous populations. This reinvigorated sense of eco-social work amplifies the vital message that social work theory and practice can no longer afford to concentrate only on the person-in-the-social-environment. The reciprocal imbrication between nature and ourselves should be placed centre-stage in the profession's understanding of what it means to practice social work in a range of environments. Yet, for this message to truly take hold, social workers must experience the spell of the sensuous for themselves. This is to experience, firsthand, the release of sentience from the inner psychological world and its reconnection with the natural terrain that surrounds us.

To conclude, we contend that the tripartite approach to sensuous events, that we have explicated, can be developed further through empirical investigation. Hence, a phenomenological research study might explore the deep meaning of such events for social

work students; it could examine how social work educators orchestrate such events particularly if they engage Indigenous Peoples as educational collaborators; it could ascertain how non-Indigenous populations value social work interventions aimed at enhancing their awareness of the natural environment; and, finally, it might explore the constraints and opportunities impacting on social workers when they attempt to embrace a critical phenomenological-ecological approach.

Funding

References

Abram, D. (1997). *The spell of the sensuous*. New York: Vintage Books.

Adorno, T. & Horkheimer, M. (2002). *Dialectic of enlightenment: Philosophical fragments*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1967). *The social construction of reality*. London: Allan Lane.

Besthorn, F. (2002). Radical environmentalism and the ecological self: Rethinking the concept of self-identity for social work practice. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, *13*(1), 53–72. DOI: 10.1300/J059v13n01_04.

Besthorn, F. (2003). Radical ecologisms: Insights for educating social workers in ecological activism and social justice. *Critical Social Work*, *4*(1), 66-106.

Besthorn, F. (2011). Deep ecology's contributions to social work: A ten-year retrospective. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 248–259. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00850.x.

Besthorn, F. (2013). Ecological approach. In M. Gray & S. Webb (Eds), *Social work theories and methods* (pp. 173-182) (2nd ed.). London: Sage.

Bourdieu, P. (1979). *Distinction*. London: Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. & Wacquant, L. (2000). Neoliberal newsspeak: Notes on the new planetary vulgate. *Radical Philosophy*, *108*(1), 37–51.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Coates, J. (2003). *Ecology and social work: Toward a new paradigm*. Halifax: Fernwood Publishing.

Coates, J. (2005). The environmental crisis: Implications for social work. *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 16(1), 25–49. DOI: 10.1300/J059v16n01_03.

Dominelli, L. (2012). *Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Duffy, J. (2006). *Participating and learning – Citizen involvement in social work education in a Northern Ireland context*. London: Social Care Institute for Excellence. www.scie.org.uk/publications/misc/citizeninvolvement.pdf.

Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge*. Brighton: Harvester.

Gaard, G. (2010). *Ecofeminism*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Germain, C.B. & Gitterman, A. (1980). *The life model of social work practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gray, M. & Coates, J. (2012). Environmental ethics for social work: Social work's responsibility to the non-human world. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 239–247. DOI:10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.oo852.x.

Gray, M., Coates, J., & Yellow Bird, M. (2008). *Indigenous social work around the world*. London: Ashgate.

Habermas, J. (1971). *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston: Beacon Press.

Habermas, J. (1987). *The theory of communicative action* (Vol. 2). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Hawkins, C. (2010). Sustainability, human rights, and environmental justice: Critical connections for contemporary social work. *Critical Social Work*, *11*(3), 68–81.

Heidegger, M. (1962). *Being and time*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Husserl, E. (1962). *Ideas. A general introduction to pure phenomenology*. London: Collier Macmillan.

Hoff, M. & McNutt, J.G. (eds.) (1994). *The global environmental crisis: Implications for social welfare and social work*. Brookfield: Ashgate.

Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. London: Penguin.

Marcuse, H. (2002). *One dimensional man*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Matthies, A., Närhi, K., & Ward, D. (Eds). (2001). *The eco-social approach in social work.* Jyväskylä: SoPhi.

Mead, G.H. (1967). *Mind, self and society.* Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1996). *The phenomenology of perception.* London: Routledge.

Meyer, C.H. (1983). *Clinical social work in the eco-systems perspective.* New York: Columbia University Press.

McDonald, C. (2007). Critical practice in a changing context. In J. Allan, L. Briskman & B. Pease (Eds), *Critical social work* (pp. 243-254). New South Wales: Allen & Unwin.

Miller, S.E., Hayward, R.A., & Shaw, T.V. (2011). Environmental shifts for social work: A principles approach. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 270–277. DOI:10.111/j.1468-2397.2011.00848.x.

Mullender, A. & Ward, D. (1991). *Self-directed groupwork: Users take action for empowerment.* London: Whiting & Birch.

Parsons, T. (1951). *The social system.* New York: Free Press.

Payne, M. (2014). *Modern social work theory* (4th Ed). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peeters, J. (2012). The place of social work in sustainable development: Towards eco-social practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *21*(3), 287–298. DOI: 10.1111/j.1468-2397.2011.00855.x.

Pincus, L. & Minahan, A. (1973). *Social work practice: Model and method.* Itasca: Peacock.

Smith, D. (2005). *Institutional ethnography: A sociology for people.* Lanham: AltaMira Press.

Smith, K. (2007). Social work, restructuring and everyday resistance: Best practices gone underground. In D. Baines (Ed) *Doing anti-oppressive practice: Building transformative politicized social work.* Fernwood: Halifax.

Ungar, M. (2002). A deeper, more social ecological social work practice. *Social Service Review*, *76*(3), 480–497. DOI: 10.1086/341185.

Von Bertalanffy, L. (1968). *General systems theory: Foundations, development, applications*. New York: George Braziller.

Weigert, A. (1997). *Self, interaction and natural environment: Refocusing our eyesight*. New York: The University of New York Press.

Žižek, S. (2014). *Event*. London: Penguin.