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From Aristotle to Arendt: A phenomenological exploration of forms of knowledge and practice in the context of child protection social work in the UK.

Journal:	<i>Qualitative Social Work</i>
Manuscript ID:	Draft
Manuscript Type:	Main Paper
Keywords:	Phenomenology, Child protection, Praxis, Social theory, Social work practice
Abstract:	<p>This paper attempts to explore the relationship between different forms of knowledge and the kinds of activity that arise from them within child protection social work practice. The argument that social work is more than either 'science' or 'art' but distinctly 'practice' is put through a historical description of the development of Aristotle's views of the forms of knowledge and Hannah Arendt's later conceptualisations as detailed in <i>The Human Condition</i> (1958). The paper supports Arendt's privileging of Praxis over Theoria within social work and further draws upon Arendt's distinctions between Labour, Work and Action to delineate between different forms of social work activity. The author highlights dangers in social work relying too heavily on technical knowledge and the use of theory as a tool in seeking to understand and engage with the people it seeks to understand and stresses the importance of a phenomenological approach to research and practice as a valid, embodied form of knowledge. The argument further explores the constructions of service users that potentially arise from different forms of social work activity and cautions against over-prescriptive use of 'outcomes' based practice that may reduce the people who use services to products or consumables. The author concludes that social work action inevitably involves trying to understand humans in a complex and dynamic way that requires engagement and to seek new meanings for individual humans.</p>

Article

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Abstract

This paper attempts to explore the relationship between different forms of knowledge and the kinds of activity that arise from them within child protection social work practice. The argument that social work is more than either 'science' or 'art' but distinctly 'practice' is put through a historical description of the development of Aristotle's views of the forms of knowledge and Hannah Arendt's later conceptualisations as detailed in *The Human Condition* (1958). The paper supports Arendt's privileging of *Praxis* over *Theoria* within social work and further draws upon Arendt's distinctions between *Labour*, *Work* and *Action* to delineate between different forms of social work activity. The author highlights dangers in social work relying too heavily on technical knowledge and the use of theory as a tool in seeking to understand and engage with the people it seeks to understand and stresses the importance of a phenomenological approach to research and practice as a valid, embodied form of knowledge. The argument further explores the constructions of service users that potentially arise from different forms of social work activity and cautions against over-prescriptive use of 'outcomes' based practice that may reduce the people who use services to products or consumables. The author concludes that social work *action* inevitably involves trying to understand humans in a complex and dynamic way that requires engagement and to seek new meanings for individual humans.

Keywords: Arendt; Aristotle; Phenomenology; Child Protection; Social Work; Theory; Praxis.

Introduction

"Social Workers fulfill one of the most difficult tasks for the community. They need to have detailed knowledge of the disciplines of psychology, sociology, social administration, human growth and development, research

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3 *methods and the law, and to maintain a nice balance between compassion*
4 *and realism, empowerment and control. They need to be aware of their own*
5 *needs and prejudices and have the strength to ensure that these do not*
6 *impact upon their work. They deal with those who are rejected by society...it*
7 *is hardly surprising that they do not always get it absolutely right” (Lord*
8 *Low of Dalston 18.1.07 taken from Hansard)*
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19 Social Work has always looked outside itself for theoretical inspiration but the
20 danger of spreading itself so thinly across so many understandings of the human
21 condition is that it often imports perspectives that it then doesn't have the depth
22 to deal with in a sufficiently nuanced way to understand and describe the very
23 complex lives of its users. Set this danger within a hotly contested political
24 context that reduces social work to "...a very narrow concern with child
25 protection" (Parton, 2014, p. 2042) and is regularly re-shaped by media frenzies
26 around tragedies such as befell Victoria Climbié, Peter Connolly and others and
27 stoked by the Risk Society (Beck, 1992); and what you have is a profession
28 unsure of its remit, unable to grasp a coherent knowledge base and struggling to
29 develop a professional identity. It seems important therefore to try to root those
30 practices in a wider examination of what it is to be human within society in order
31 to inform the judgements and decisions we make about the value and worth of
32 childhood, family and community.
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53 Social work academics set fortifications around their theoretical camps:
54 psychological versus sociological; positivist versus hermeneutic; critical
55 theorists versus the apolitical (e.g. Narey, 2014). The nineties saw a widespread
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1
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3 acceptance of the radical mantra of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) based in
4
5 Marxian, structuralist understandings that employed catch-22 like phrases such
6
7 as “If you’re not part of the solution, you’re part of the problem” (Thompson,
8
9 1992, cited in Beckett and Maynard, 2005). This was hard to challenge or to
10
11 contextualise for who would not agree that we ought to be against oppression
12
13 and injustice? While AOP as a ‘practice theory’ seems to be in decline the social
14
15 work literature still proffers a range of theoretical understandings that recognise
16
17 the political nature of social work in general (Garrett, 2009) and child protection
18
19 in particular (Parton, 2014) for how can we intervene as agents of the state in
20
21 family life without recognising that as a political act? However, while we stand
22
23 on the deck saluting the flag of social justice we have been scuttling ourselves
24
25 with neo-liberal technical approaches to practice (Garrett, 2009) and, I would
26
27 argue, epistemically sinking. The quest for certainty so that it ‘...will never
28
29 happen again’ lead us to clutch at performance management straws that
30
31 inevitably give way when it *does* happen again.
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39 Surely then our appropriation of attachment theory and its growing evidence
40
41 base within neuropathology would provide us with safer ground. Yet again we
42
43 clutch enthusiastically to certainty in the modern project. With a few notable
44
45 exceptions (Wastell and White, 2012. Featherstone et al, 2014) we watch as the
46
47 next generation of social workers suffer the consequences of intellectual
48
49 inbreeding, fumbling through practice with webbed theories and six-fingered
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51 methodologies that give up on families unable to reach the optimal state of a
52
53 ‘secure pattern’ attachment with their child (Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011).
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3 These two extremes of practice are vital to our understanding of the complex
4
5 worlds that our service users and ourselves inhabit but while we wait for the
6
7 battle between macro and micro to burn itself out, we seem to have lost the
8
9 ability to engage on the meso level. Yet here lies the *social* – the points that
10
11 validate our position as *social* workers – what Goffman (Lemert & Branaman,
12
13 1997) called the *Interaction Order*. These are the points that individuals interact
14
15 with their environments. Social Work seems to have lost its capacity to focus on
16
17 the social through its self-righteous determination to *safeguard* individuals from
18
19 their families, leading to calls from authors to separate child protection from
20
21 social work (Parton, 2014) and, I would argue, more ethical calls to ‘re-imagine’
22
23 child protection work as family, rather than child, centred (Featherstone et al,
24
25 2014). I offer this paper as a contribution to addressing some of the fundamental
26
27 ways of thinking about what child protection social workers *do* by addressing
28
29 ways of *knowing*. In doing this I will be unashamedly claiming phenomenology as
30
31 the legitimate approach to understanding social work as both practice and
32
33 research methodology. If we are, as Croisedale-Appleby (2014) recommends, to
34
35 produce social workers as practitioners, professionals and social scientists then
36
37 we need to embrace an approach that enables all three. One could argue that we
38
39 are in fact in a state that Kuhn describes as ‘essential tension’ in that the world of
40
41 child protection we currently inhabit is ‘out of joint’ with any one of the
42
43 knowledge traditions we draw upon. Kuhn might view the current state of social
44
45 work knowledge as being in a crisis in which ‘epistemological counter-instances’
46
47 are leading us toward the emergence of a new and different analysis. (Kuhn,
48
49 1996, p.78)
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3 What we find are syntheses and appropriations of thought from other disciplines
4
5 be applied with varying degrees of success such as Hayes & Houston's (2007) use
6
7 of Habermas in combining critical theory with Schutz's phenomenology as a way
8
9 of theorizing child protection. It is also easy to agree with Garrett (2007) that
10
11 social work's chief theoretical and practical preoccupations could orientate the
12
13 profession in the direction of Bourdieu who specifically sets out to develop a
14
15 theory of practice for sociological research. We are beginning to see more use of
16
17 phenomenology within research (Author & Boxall, 2011, Nordberg, 2014, Gibson,
18
19 2014) as well as ethnomethodological work that has had significant impact upon
20
21 practice (Broadhurst et al, 2010). While Bourdieu (1977) viewed
22
23 ethnomethodology as the currently active form of phenomenology, Tesch (1994,
24
25 cited in Gray, 2014) distinguishes between phenomenological research and
26
27 ethnography. Both are based upon description and interpretation but
28
29 ethnographic research is focused more on culture while phenomenology
30
31 concerns itself with the human experience of the 'life-world'. Phenomenology's
32
33 focus then is on individuals' 'lived experiences' while ethnographers make use of
34
35 'sites'. Although Arendt (1906-1975) only occasionally characterized herself as a
36
37 phenomenologist (Moran, 2000) and is a glaring omission from some textbooks
38
39 (e.g. Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009) much of her arguments come from her time as
40
41 Heidegger's student (Inwood, 1997) and her subsequent reworking of some of
42
43 his thought. Her belief that we should not consider humanity to have an essential
44
45 nature but a certain condition, which is only permanent in as much as it
46
47 conditions and is conditioned by everything with which it comes into contact
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49 (Arendt, 1958, p9-10) clearly sets her as a phenomenologist. Arendt argues that
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51 this phenomenal nature of the world appears differently to each person (Kattago,
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3 2014). One of her key points is that *men* and not *man (sic)* inhabit the world and
4
5 we have to think of the human condition as plural and not a fixed state that
6
7 applies to all. Villa (1996, p.24-5) points out the resonances between Arendt's
8
9 work and that of Weber, Adorno and Foucault in making the point that society
10
11 excludes the possibility of action by absorbing the public realm and emasculating
12
13 plurality.
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16 Humanity for Arendt is plural and we are always therefore dealing with
17
18 individual humans, not with abstract 'humanity'. This seems to me to be in
19
20 perfect accord with a view of social work that seeks to make sense of the lived
21
22 experiences of individuals and it is surprising that phenomenology is rarely
23
24 articulated in its literature.
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30 The social work literature is however, peppered with hand-wringing about the
31
32 disconnect between theory and practice and whether social work is 'art' or
33
34 'science' (e.g. Gitterman & White, 2013, Cash, 2001, Hudson, 2009, Trinder,
35
36 1996). By drawing upon Hannah Arendt's reworking of Aristotle's *Intellectual*
37
38 *Virtues*, I intend to describe different forms of knowledge and the activity that
39
40 flows from each in relation to child protection social work and the related
41
42 construction of the 'service user' that follows. In doing so I intend to argue that
43
44 social work needs to recognise what aspects of itself are 'art' and which 'science'
45
46 but ultimately to claim itself as distinctly 'practice'.
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53 *"The knowledge that social work seeks cannot be made in universities by*
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55 *individuals who presumptively seek timeless, context-less truths about human*
56
57 *nature, societies, institutions and policy. The knowledge must be developed in*
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3 *the living situations that are confronted by the contemporary episodes in the*
4
5 *field...*" (Rein & White, 1981, p.37)
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11 **Aristotle**

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17 In *The Nichomachean Ethics* (2009 edition) Aristotle (384-322 BC) set out the
18
19 beginnings of the contest highlighted above in that he divided the world into
20
21 *things that change* and *things that do not* which led him to distinguish between
22
23 two main branches of knowledge. Aristotle described the knowledge of the
24
25 unchanging as *theoria* and knowledge of what changes as *praxis*, which includes
26
27 knowledge of things done, or *poeisis*, knowledge of things made. His argument
28
29 that intellect of itself moves nothing is apposite in this discussion because social
30
31 work is by its very nature 'action'. We must therefore try to understand the
32
33 interplay between *Theoria*, *Poeisis* and *Praxis* and explore the further sub-
34
35 divisions.
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42 *Theoria* – Aristotle described *scientific knowledge* as proceeding through both
43
44 induction (*nous*) and deduction (*epistêmê*). Together these constitute wisdom
45
46 (*sophia*). He defines scientific knowledge as 'judgement about things that are
47
48 universal and necessary' (Aristotle, 2009, p.107) and therefore unchanging.

49
50 The academy concerns itself with this form of knowledge and theory is therefore
51
52 afforded primacy. Much comment then is on why the practitioner is failing to use
53
54 the knowledge provided to it (Marsh and Fisher, 2008) However, Aristotle
55
56 himself, while privileging this form of knowledge over others, said that it ends in
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3 contemplation and produces no human action. (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2009.
4
5 Aristotle, 2009) Social work is concerned precisely with human action in a
6
7 constantly changing social and political context so the use of theory or scientific
8
9 knowledge is by its nature likely to have limited application.
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14 *Poeisis* - Aristotle separated 'things made' from 'things done' and articulated a
15
16 form of knowledge of production as *art*. To be engaged in production a technical
17
18 knowledge (*technê*) is required. It seems to me that the recent neoliberal techno-
19
20 rationalist emphasis on individual outcomes for social work users requires
21
22 knowledge of production. Performance indicators therefore have mistakenly
23
24 sought to measure social work as a productive profession, rather than as an
25
26 active one. (Broadhurst et al 2010, White et al 2008) Knowledge here has
27
28 emphasised the counting of social work 'outcomes', e.g. the number of children
29
30 subject to a safeguarding plan, proportion of children brought into care or
31
32 subject to proceedings, length of time within which assessments are completed
33
34 etc. A little thought around this would question whether there are ever outputs
35
36 for social work activity and at what stage they are measurable? Understanding
37
38 social work as being concerned with children's welfare, by which I mean the total
39
40 state of being well, rather than the presence or otherwise of risk factors makes
41
42 knowledge derived from social work *products* problematic.
43
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50 *Praxis* - according to Aristotle this derives from activity that is not about
51
52 producing something and requires *phronêsis* (prudence) or knowledge of how to
53
54 act in particular situations rather than the application of general principles. He
55
56 argued that it is *phronêsis* that guides action (2009). Aristotle describes the need
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2
3 for practical knowledge in understanding the *variables* that aren't demonstrable
4
5 by science. He argues that practical wisdom cannot be science or art but a true
6
7 and reasoned capacity to act with things that are good or bad for man. Aristotle
8
9 goes on to argue that within practical wisdom there cannot be 'excellence'
10
11 because it is a virtue and not an art. Rorty (p 343) suggests Aristotle felt
12
13 contemplative and practical lives "...provide the conditions for one another's
14
15 fullest development". However, he clearly privileged theoretical over practical
16
17 knowledge.
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23 **Arendt**

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28 There is little dispute within the literature (Higgins, 2011, Hayden, 2014, Villa,
29
30 1996) that Arendt is fundamentally an Aristotelian but her refinement breathes
31
32 fresh life into his ideas. In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt challenges
33
34 Aristotle's view that *theoria* is a superior form of knowledge and privileges
35
36 *praxis*. *The Human Condition* is ambitious in its scope and within it Arendt seeks
37
38 to explain how she develops Aristotle's themes and distinctions between
39
40 different forms of knowledge and how these relate to human activity. In the first
41
42 part, Arendt sets out the bones of her discussion by introducing the distinction
43
44 between the active life (*vita activa*) and the contemplative life (*vita*
45
46 *contemplativa*). It is here she first asserts her separation from Aristotle in her
47
48 privileging of the active life over the contemplative. She positions herself as
49
50 believing that there is no essential human nature – only a certain condition and
51
52 that in order to be fully human men need to fully engage in political action with
53
54 each other.
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5 “Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a
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8 god is capable of it and only action is entirely dependent upon the
9
10 constant presence of others.” (Arendt, 1958 p.22-23)
11

12
13
14 According to Higgins (2011, p.91) she contends that as the *contemplative life* rose
15
16 in the estimation of late antiquity, the *active life* came to be understood as
17
18 opposite – i.e. non-contemplative life, which blurred the distinctions within it,
19
20 cleaving theory and practice. By the time the *active life* regained pride of place in
21
22 early modernity, mainly through the stress that Marx placed on the primacy of
23
24 labour, its internal hierarchy had been reversed and its values distorted.
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30 *The contemplative life*

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35 Arendt then is at pains to re-establish clear distinctions between the
36
37 contemplative life and the active life but to offer a more thorough description
38
39 and analysis of the types of activity humans engage in within society. Arendt was
40
41 definitely not anti-theoretical but she was clear as to its place. She invites us to
42
43 view theory as “not a tool but a region of thought” (Vasquez, 2006, p.44), which I
44
45 would argue is a useful way to approach theory within social work. When we
46
47 adopt theories as tools they tend to become sledgehammers rather than
48
49 electron-microscopes and minimize our potential for thoughtful reflection and
50
51 analysis.
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56 *The active life*

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5 Arendt refines Aristotle by distinguishing between three domains within the
6
7 active life: For Arendt, *labour*, *work* and *action* are all parts of human life but are
8
9 hierarchical and in the end it is *action* that is the pinnacle of human activity, the
10
11 *sine qua non* of leading a fully human life. (Higgins, 2011, p. 91)
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- 14
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17 • Labour – is activity that is about maintenance of a state. Arendt argues
18
19 against the Marxian idea that labour is man’s essence, that humanity
20
21 creates itself through labour. For Arendt nothing is further from the truth.
22
23 She pointedly describes much of active life as *Labour*, which, in marked
24
25 contrast to Marx, she sees has having no inherent human worth. While it
26
27 is necessary to sustain life, it is simply all the activity that men undertake
28
29 to maintain the status quo: growing food that is eaten, cleaning
30
31 workspaces etc. For something to possess value it must possess durability
32
33 – labour only produces consumables and leaves nothing behind. The
34
35 result of the effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent.
36
37 (Villa, 1996, p.26) She saw increasing automation in the workplace as
38
39 producing a society of labourers.
40
41
42
- 43
44 • Work –in contrast to labour is a distinctly human activity that equates
45
46 most closely with Aristotle’s description of *poiesis* – a knowledge of how
47
48 to make things - or ‘art’. The distinguishing characteristic of work is its
49
50 purposiveness; all work aims at the creation of a durable and lasting
51
52 product, and so possesses directionality, a teleological quality utterly
53
54 absent from labour. Work destroys nature through its creation of
55
56 artefacts. The products of work ‘reifications’ do not find their way back
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3 into the cycle of natural growth and decay but endure outside it. In work,
4
5 men are artisans and artists who create products. However, Arendt
6
7 argued that the products that work adds to the world also give rise to
8
9 labour. (Higgins, 2011) Arendt sees technology and the consumer society
10
11 as ultimately devaluing work. If what is created is only to be consumed
12
13 and ends up back in the cycle of decay, the activity of creating it is labour.
14
15
16 What is left is not a society of workers exercising a craft but a society of
17
18 labourers who consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain
19
20 their own lives and those of their families. The transformation of the
21
22 whole society into a labouring society permeates human existence with a
23
24 necessity and sameness – humanity – human beings as public actors, as
25
26 unique individuals – is threatened with extinction.
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- 32 • Action - Arendt reserves the word action for only a small subset of the full
33
34 variety of human doings and efforts – action is closely connected with
35
36 ‘speech’ for only man “...can communicate himself”. [There is future
37
38 potential to explore the bridge that Arendt builds between Wittgenstein’s
39
40 description of the linguistic turn and Habermas’ theory of
41
42 “Communicative Action” (Habermas, 1977)]. She goes onto argue, that
43
44 man can live without either labouring or working (you could pay
45
46 someone to labour for you and choose not to produce anything durable)
47
48 but that a life without speech and action has ceased to be a human life
49
50 “...because it is no longer lived among men.” (*sic*) The truly human
51
52 condition then, she argues, lies within a web of human relationships and it
53
54 is what happens ‘in-between’ people, which is valuable. Arendt argued
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3 that practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), the primary intellectual virtue of
4 deliberation concerned with action, is not merely concerned with the
5 selection of means, as is *technê* or art. Rather, in deliberating, the man of
6 practical wisdom, the *phronimos*, is more concerned with finding what is
7 good for himself and his fellow citizens. (Villa, 1996, p.32). This
8 represents the highest sphere of human engagement especially in co-
9 operation and discussion. It is only in the life of action as opposed to
10 abstract thought that humans become fully authentic and is the only
11 realm where it is possible to achieve excellence. Action for Arendt must
12 involve initiating a new beginning - *natality* (Arendt, 1958, p.9) What I
13 find particularly exciting about Arendt's discussion of *action* is the idea
14 that human activity itself *creates* new beginnings. She steps away from
15 Heidegger's rather pessimistic focus on *mortality* by stressing *natality*.
16 Humans acting together give birth to new ideas and understandings from
17 within the already existing set of ideas and understandings from which
18 they come and move them onwards. New stories are created through
19 people acting together. One of the consequences of *natality* is that any
20 new understanding is fleeting, for it will cause people within this web of
21 relationships to think and behave in new ways, which in turn will cause
22 others to have new understandings ad infinitum. There is no product as
23 such but the human condition moves on.
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51 52 53 **Application to child protection social work** 54

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58 It is precisely this hopefulness in the capacity of humans to create new stories
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2
3 that I believe offers healthy prospects for social work. Too often we try to tie
4
5 people down as fitting within a certain category, conforming to a set of
6
7 behaviours that we understand as relating to a particular essential condition.
8
9 Once we have fixed this understanding we have a sense that we can 'know' what
10
11 it is to be that person and how to work with them to either change their
12
13 behaviour or situation or to recognise it as being beyond redemption. In recent
14
15 years child protection social work has relied heavily upon attachment theory as
16
17 first described by Bowlby and subsequent theorists (Howe et al, 1999;
18
19 Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011). The idea that the nature of the relationship a
20
21 child forms with their primary caregiver in the first few years of life sets their
22
23 patterns of behaviours and relationships for the rest of their lives is an attractive
24
25 yet potentially toxic one. Social workers stress the criticality of the early years
26
27 and frequently see parents who had difficult childhoods themselves as therefore
28
29 incapable of change. Social work interventions then seek to break the chain of
30
31 insecure attachments often by removing children and placing them in new
32
33 relationships with primary caregivers judged as being able to promote a secure
34
35 attachment. Whilst this approach is beginning to gather a more critical appraisal
36
37 (e.g. Wastell & White, 2012) we need to have new understandings to challenge
38
39 scientific determinism.
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48 I feel that Arendt can begin to inform this search by recognising that we can't
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50 rely upon the simple application of high theory to very complex webs of
51
52 relationships. Simply taking people through child protection processes is simply
53
54 to subject them to social *labour*. Nor can we necessarily rely upon
55
56 straightforward technical solutions to dynamic, uncertain, human issues, for as
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3 soon as we have *acted* with people we have set off a new chain of meanings and
4
5 understandings that that person will draw upon in acting in the world. We can't
6
7 therefore understand their lives as products of social *work* as those are fleeting.
8
9 We have to engage with people in a form of social *action*, responding to their
10
11 evolving condition and recognising the new understandings we are generating
12
13 in-between us.
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18 Arendt invites us to try to understand each individual's unique perspective on
19
20 their lives and to avoid slipping into a belief that there is a fixed human nature
21
22 that is essential and predictive. This is a phenomenological understanding of the
23
24 human condition that recognises the potential for new beginnings. While there
25
26 will always be child protection concerns so severe that we may not be able to
27
28 safely allow parents to care for a particular child or children at this point in their
29
30 lives, allowing ourselves to believe that people can change and may be able to
31
32 successfully parent in the future is particularly important. As Broadhurst and
33
34 Mason (2013) argue, casting women as 'maternal outcasts' subject to successive
35
36 compulsory removals of their children raises many ethical, legal and practical
37
38 challenges to social work practitioners. It is also extremely resource intensive
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40 and logjams child protection team caseloads and the family courts.
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48 Approaching service users as consistently capable of change also allows practice
49
50 wisdom to be used in a positive direction towards keeping families together,
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52 solving problems, finding new ways to behave and creating new stories. This is
53
54 inherently a more satisfactory and satisfying way to practice social work and
55
56 also I would argue a more human way to live and practice – immersing ourselves
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3 in *action* with our fellow human beings. We need to thus remove ourselves to a
4
5 sufficient distance to recognize that some of what we do currently are not
6
7 ‘activities’ but ‘processes’ which remove us from engagement with the people
8
9 who use our services and to heed Arendt’s warning that:
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14 “It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an
15
16 unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in
17
18 the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known.” (1958,
19
20 p.322)
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24
25 Arendt’s analysis shows that theory is displaced not by *action* but by *work* and
26
27 ultimately *labour* – the ideal of fabrication gives new impetus to cognitive
28
29 pursuits in the direction of natural science – in which knowing is intimately tied
30
31 to making (Higgins, 2011) Thus even as work (whose products include tools)
32
33 helps to lighten our labour, it creates a ‘second task of labouring’ in order to
34
35 maintain the system. Recent innovation within child protection work is towards
36
37 a series of approaches that rely heavily on such tools aimed at enabling
38
39 engagement with service users. While I welcome coherent approaches to
40
41 engaging with children and their families (Author, 2013a, 2013b) there is a real
42
43 and present danger that social workers will rely only on their knowledge
44
45 (*technê*) of the tools and their application and thus become ‘technicians’. The
46
47 other danger is that practice will become measured not by the quality of the
48
49 analysis but by the completion of the task and I have already heard of social
50
51 workers criticized by managers for not having completed and placed a “Three
52
53 Houses Tool” on a child’s record, even when the child was pre-lingual and the
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3 tool therefore inappropriate. Again, we reduce *action* to *work* to *labour*. Arendt
4
5 (1958, p. 196) claimed that "...interpretation of action in terms of making,
6
7 actually spoils the action itself and its true result, the relationship it should have
8
9 established."
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14 In constructing people as 'service users' we are already to some extent reducing
15
16 their humanity to that of, at best, 'consumers' of social work labour. However, as
17
18 Featherstone et al (2014, p.96) remind us "...Arendt identified the treatment of
19
20 humanity as superfluous as beginning whenever people are reduced to a state,
21
22 for example of being homeless or socially burdensome." There is also a danger
23
24 that in reducing practice to the technical application of tools, we reduce children
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26 and families to 'products' or even 'consumables'. (Ruch et al, 2010; Garrett,
27
28 2009)
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34 The measurement of social work outcomes seems to me equally problematic. At
35
36 what point can we measure the outcomes of a person's life – Arendt would say
37
38 only when they are dead. (Arendt, 1958, p.192). According to Higgins, (2011,
39
40 p.100) '...the frailty of action lies in its unpredictability, its irreversibility and its
41
42 evanescence.'. Human action can't be undone but its meaning will be persistently
43
44 re-interpreted. In 'completing' a social work assessment and placing it on
45
46 permanent record we are attempting to fix an understanding of the people who
47
48 are its subjects and then formulate a piece of work towards stated outcomes.
49
50 Assessments conducted within the domain of child protection in the current
51
52 climate tend to focus on 'risk factors' and plan outcomes that either reduce or
53
54 remove those risks. Featherstone et al, (2014) see the child-centred risk
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3 paradigm as highly problematic ethically. They go on to argue that practices
4 rooted in this approach are likely to leave children less safe. I agree, for to reduce
5 complex and dynamic webs of relationships to a few isolated SMART targets is to
6 fail to recognize, as Arendt does, the limits of our abilities to solve equations with
7 too many variables. Action is 'boundless' and resonates beyond its immediate
8 context (Higgins, 2011).
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19 Better then to engage in relationships with families that enable us to sustain a
20 continually evolving understanding of what is happening and to effect change
21 based upon dynamic action within the situation (Hall, 2012). While I might
22 disagree with some of the theoretical underpinnings of Ruch et al's (2010)
23 articulation, I fully support theirs and Ferguson's (2005) assertion that placing
24 the relationship at the heart of social work practice enables the worker to move
25 beyond surface understandings and as intrinsically valuable as an intervention in
26 its own right.
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39 **Conclusions**

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43 Broadhurst and Mason, (2014) label the 'informational turn' as tethering social
44 workers to their computer workstations at the expense of investing in the skills
45 of direct work with children and families. There has been extensive critique of
46 this reduction of social work to labour – feeding the Integrated Children's System
47 (Parton, 2008, White et al, 2008). However, Broadhurst and Mason (2014) feel
48 that there is a resurgence of interest in embodied ways of knowing. It seems to
49 me that the argument is a turn away from theoretical and technical rationality
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3 toward *phronêsis*, which according to Gillespie (in Dreyfus and Wrathall (2009,
4 p.359) was a decisive step in the development of both existentialism and
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8 phenomenology.
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12 Martinez-Brawley & Mendez – Bonita Zorita (1998) argue that social work
13
14 actions should be guided not by formal theory but a form of reflection that
15
16 generates a unique theory in action, or *praxis*. Thompson (2005, p.69) similarly
17
18 states “Theory provides us with the cloth from which to tailor our garment, it
19
20 does not provide ‘off the peg’ solutions to practice problems.” My reading of
21
22 Arendt, coupled with my own practice experience leads me to assert that it is
23
24 even more fundamental than that. We weave our own cloth. When engaging with
25
26 a new family who need social work services we pick out the strands relevant to
27
28 the situation drawing from: sociology, psychology, professional and personal
29
30 values, practice experience, intuition, common sense, legislation, policy,
31
32 compassion, control etc. Assessment helps us to determine what strands are
33
34 pertinent to our engagement with these particular service users and analysis
35
36 helps us to decide what to do with which strands; which to pick up, which to
37
38 leave, in which order to put them together. We generate a new understanding
39
40 about each family’s needs and how to help them, aiming to weave particular
41
42 relationships and valuing those relationships for their inherent worth. We need
43
44 theory as a region of thought rather than tool, we need to *labour* in order to
45
46 maintain the system, we need to *work* with service users toward their goals but
47
48 ultimately we need to be involved in *action* with children and families in order to
49
50 enable new meanings to be formed. I fear however, that we will ultimately only
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52 be measured by how much we *labour*.
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5112 Words.

For Peer Review

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