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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.

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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*

methods and the law, and to maintain a nice balance between compassion and realism, empowerment and control. They need to be aware of their own needs and prejudices and have the strength to ensure that these do not impact upon their work. They deal with those who are rejected by society…it is hardly surprising that they do not always get it absolutely right" (Lord Low of Dalston 18.1.07 taken from Hansard)

Social Work has always looked outside itself for theoretical inspiration but the danger of spreading itself so thinly across so many understandings of the human condition is that it often imports perspectives that it then doesn't have the depth to deal with in a sufficiently nuanced way to understand and describe the very complex lives of its users. Set this danger within a hotly contested political context that reduces social work to "…a very narrow concern with child protection" (Parton, 2014, p. 2042) and is regularly re-shaped by media frenzies around tragedies such as befell Victoria Climbié, Peter Connolly and others and stoked by the Risk Society (Beck, 1992); and what you have is a profession unsure of its remit, unable to grasp a coherent knowledge base and struggling to develop a professional identity. It seems important therefore to try to root those practices in a wider examination of what it is to be human within society in order to inform the judgements and decisions we make about the value and worth of childhood, family and community.

Social work academics set fortifications around their theoretical camps: psychological versus sociological; positivist versus hermeneutic; critical theorists versus the apolitical (e.g. Narey, 2014). The nineties saw a widespread

acceptance of the radical mantra of anti-oppressive practice (AOP) based in Marxian, structuralist understandings that employed catch-22 like phrases such as "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem" (Thompson, 1992, cited in Beckett and Maynard, 2005). This was hard to challenge or to contextualise for who would not agree that we ought to be against oppression and injustice? While AOP as a 'practice theory' seems to be in decline the social work literature still proffers a range of theoretical understandings that recognise the political nature of social work in general (Garrett, 2009) and child protection in particular (Parton, 2014) for how can we intervene as agents of the state in family life without recognising that as a political act? However, while we stand on the deck saluting the flag of social justice we have been scuttling ourselves with neo-liberal technical approaches to practice (Garrett, 2009) and, I would argue, epistemically sinking. The quest for certainty so that it '…will never happen again' lead us to clutch at performance management straws that inevitably give way when it *does* happen again.

Surely then our appropriation of attachment theory and its growing evidence base within neuropathology would provide us with safer ground. Yet again we clutch enthusiastically to certainty in the modern project. With a few notable exceptions (Wastell and White, 2012. Featherstone et al, 2014) we watch as the next generation of social workers suffer the consequences of intellectual inbreeding, fumbling through practice with webbed theories and six-fingered methodologies that give up on families unable to reach the optimal state of a 'secure pattern' attachment with their child (Shemmings and Shemmings, 2011).

These two extremes of practice are vital to our understanding of the complex worlds that our service users and ourselves inhabit but while we wait for the battle between macro and micro to burn itself out, we seem to have lost the ability to engage on the meso level. Yet here lies the *social* – the points that validate our position as *social* workers – what Goffman (Lemert & Branaman, 1997) called the *Interaction* Order. These are the points that individuals interact with their environments. Social Work seems to have lost its capacity to focus on the social through its self-righteous determination to *safeguard* individuals from their families, leading to calls from authors to separate child protection from social work (Parton, 2014) and, I would argue, more ethical calls to 're-imagine' child protection work as family, rather than child, centred (Featherstone et al, 2014). I offer this paper as a contribution to addressing some of the fundamental ways of thinking about what child protection social workers *do* by addressing ways of *knowing*. In doing this I will be unashamedly claiming phenomenology as the legitimate approach to understanding social work as both practice and research methodology. If we are, as Croisedale-Appleby (2014) recommends, to produce social workers as practitioners, professionals and social scientists then we need to embrace an approach that enables all three. One could argue that we are in fact in a state that Kuhn describes as 'essential tension' in that the world of child protection we currently inhabit is 'out of joint' with any one of the knowledge traditions we draw upon. Kuhn might view the current state of social work knowledge as being in a crisis in which 'epistemological counter-instances' are leading us toward the emergence of a new and different analysis. (Kuhn, 1996, p.78)

What we find are syntheses and appropriations of thought from other disciplines be applied with varying degrees of success such as Hayes & Houston's (2007) use of Habermas in combining critical theory with Schutz's phenomenology as a way of theorizing child protection. It is also easy to agree with Garrett (2007) that social work's chief theoretical and practical preoccupations could orientate the profession in the direction of Bourdieu who specifically sets out to develop a theory of practice for sociological research. We are beginning to see more use of phenomenology within research (Author & Boxall, 2011, Nordberg, 2014, Gibson, 2014) as well as ethnomethodological work that has had significant impact upon practice (Broadhurst et al, 2010). While Bourdieu (1977) viewed ethnomethodology as the currently active form of phenomenology, Tesch (1994, cited in Gray, 2014) distinguishes between phenomenological research and ethnography. Both are based upon description and interpretation but ethnographic research is focused more on culture while phenomenology concerns itself with the human experience of the 'life-world'. Phenomenology's focus then is on individuals' 'lived experiences' while ethnographers make use of 'sites'. Although Arendt (1906–1975) only occasionally characterized herself as a phenomenologist (Moran, 2000) and is a glaring omission from some textbooks (e.g. Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2009) much of her arguments come from her time as Heidegger's student (Inwood, 1997) and her subsequent reworking of some of his thought. Her belief that we should not consider humanity to have an essential nature but a certain condition, which is only permanent in as much as it conditions and is conditioned by everything with which it comes into contact (Arendt, 1958, p9-10) clearly sets her as a phenomenologist. Arendt argues that this phenomenal nature of the world appears differently to each person (Kattago,

2014). One of her key points is that *men* and not *man (sic)* inhabit the world and we have to think of the human condition as plural and not a fixed state that applies to all. Villa (1996, p.24-5) points out the resonances between Arendt's work and that of Weber, Adorno and Foucault in making the point that society excludes the possibility of action by absorbing the public realm and emasculating plurality.

Humanity for Arendt is plural and we are always therefore dealing with individual humans, not with abstract 'humanity'. This seems to me to be in perfect accord with a view of social work that seeks to make sense of the lived experiences of individuals and it is surprising that phenomenology is rarely articulated in its literature.

The social work literature is however, peppered with hand-wringing about the disconnect between theory and practice and whether social work is 'art' or 'science' (e.g. Gitterman & White, 2013, Cash, 2001, Hudson, 2009, Trinder, 1996). By drawing upon Hannah Arendt's reworking of Aristotle's *Intellectual Virtues*, I intend to describe different forms of knowledge and the activity that flows from each in relation to child protection social work and the related construction of the 'service user' that follows. In doing so I intend to argue that social work needs to recognise what aspects of itself are 'art' and which 'science' but ultimately to claim itself as distinctly 'practice'.

> *"The knowledge that social work seeks cannot be made in universities by individuals who presumptively seek timeless, context-less truths about human nature, societies, institutions and policy. The knowledge must be developed in*

the living situations that are confronted by the contemporary episodes in the field…" (Rein & White, 1981, p.37)

Aristotle

In *The Nichomachean Ethics* (2009 edition) Aristotle (384-322 BC) set out the beginnings of the contest highlighted above in that he divided the world into *things that change* and *things that do not* which led him to distinguish between two main branches of knowledge. Aristotle described the knowledge of the unchanging as *theoria* and knowledge of what changes as *praxis,* which includes knowledge of things done, or *poeisis,* knowledge of things made. His argument that intellect of itself moves nothing is apposite in this discussion because social work is by its very nature 'action'. We must therefore try to understand the interplay between *Theoria, Poeisis* and *Praxis* and explore the further sub-divisions.

Theoria – Aristotle described *scientific knowledge* as proceeding through both induction (*nous*) and deduction (*epistêmê*). Together these constitute wisdom (*sophia*). He defines scientific knowledge as 'judgement about things that are universal and necessary' (Aristotle, 2009, p.107) and therefore unchanging.

The academy concerns itself with this form of knowledge and theory is therefore afforded primacy. Much comment then is on why the practitioner is failing to use the knowledge provided to it (Marsh and Fisher, 2008) However, Aristotle himself, while privileging this form of knowledge over others, said that it ends in

contemplation and produces no human action. (Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2009. Aristotle, 2009) Social work is concerned precisely with human action in a constantly changing social and political context so the use of theory or scientific knowledge is by its nature likely to have limited application.

Poeisis - Aristotle separated 'things made' from 'things done' and articulated a form of knowledge of production as *art.* To be engaged in production a technical knowledge (*technê*) is required. It seems to me that the recent neoliberal techno-rationalist emphasis on individual outcomes for social work users requires knowledge of production. Performance indicators therefore have mistakenly sought to measure social work as a productive profession, rather than as an active one. (Broadhurst et al 2010, White et al 2008) Knowledge here has emphasised the counting of social work 'outcomes', e.g. the number of children subject to a safeguarding plan, proportion of children brought into care or subject to proceedings, length of time within which assessments are completed etc. A little thought around this would question whether there are ever outputs for social work activity and at what stage they are measurable? Understanding social work as being concerned with children's welfare, by which I mean the total state of being well, rather than the presence or otherwise of risk factors makes knowledge derived from social work *products* problematic.

Praxis – according to Aristotle this derives from activity that is not about producing something and requires *phronêsis* (prudence) or knowledge of how to act in particular situations rather than the application of general principles. He argued that it is *phronêsis* that guides action (2009). Aristotle describes the need

for practical knowledge in understanding the *variables* that aren't demonstrable by science. He argues that practical wisdom cannot be science or art but a true and reasoned capacity to act with things that are good or bad for man. Aristotle goes on to argue that within practical wisdom there cannot be 'excellence' because it is a virtue and not an art. Rorty (p 343) suggests Aristotle felt contemplative and practical lives "…provide the conditions for one another's fullest development". However, he clearly privileged theoretical over practical knowledge.

Arendt

There is little dispute within the literature (Higgins, 2011, Hayden, 2014, Villa, 1996) that Arendt is fundamentally an Aristotelian but her refinement breathes fresh life into his ideas. In *The Human Condition* (1958) Arendt challenges Aristotle's view that *theoria* is a superior form of knowledge and privileges *praxis*. *The Human Condition* is ambitious in its scope and within it Arendt seeks to explain how she develops Aristotle's themes and distinctions between different forms of knowledge and how these relate to human activity. In the first part, Arendt sets out the bones of her discussion by introducing the distinction between the active life *(vita activa)* and the contemplative life *(vita contemplativa).* It is here she first asserts her separation from Aristotle in her privileging of the active life over the contemplative. She positions herself as believing that there is no essential human nature – only a certain condition and that in order to be fully human men need to fully engage in political action with each other.

> "Action alone is the exclusive prerogative of man; neither a beast nor a god is capable of it and only action is entirely dependent upon the constant presence of others." (Arendt, 1958 p.22-23)

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

The contemplative life

Arendt then is at pains to re-establish clear distinctions between the contemplative life and the active life but to offer a more thorough description and analysis of the types of activity humans engage in within society. Arendt was definitely not anti-theoretical but she was clear as to its place. She invites us to view theory as "not a tool but a region of thought" (Vasquez, 2006, p.44), which I would argue is a useful way to approach theory within social work. When we adopt theories as tools they tend to become sledgehammers rather than electron-microscopes and minimize our potential for thoughtful reflection and analysis.

The active life

Arendt refines Aristotle by distinguishing between three domains within the active life: For Arendt, *labour, work* and *action* are all parts of human life but are hierarchical and in the end it is *action* that is the pinnacle of human activity, the *sine qua non* of leading a fully human life. (Higgins, 2011, p. 91)

- Labour – is activity that is about maintenance of a state. Arendt argues against the Marxian idea that labour is man's essence, that humanity creates itself through labour. For Arendt nothing is further from the truth. She pointedly describes much of active life as *Labour,* which, in marked contrast to Marx, she sees has having no inherent human worth. While it is necessary to sustain life, it is simply all the activity that men undertake to maintain the status quo: growing food that is eaten, cleaning workspaces etc. For something to possess value it must possess durability – labour only produces consumables and leaves nothing behind. The result of the effort is almost as quickly consumed as the effort is spent. (Villa, 1996, p.26) She saw increasing automation in the workplace as producing a society of labourers.
- Work –in contrast to labour is a distinctly human activity that equates most closely with Aristotle's description of *poeisis* – a knowledge of how to make things - or 'art'. The distinguishing characteristic of work is its purposiveness; all work aims at the creation of a durable and lasting product, and so possesses directionality, a teleological quality utterly absent from labour. Work destroys nature through its creation of artefacts. The products of work 'reifications' do not find their way back

into the cycle of natural growth and decay but endure outside it. In work, men are artisans and artists who create products. However, Arendt argued that the products that work adds to the world also give rise to labour. (Higgins, 2011) Arendt sees technology and the consumer society as ultimately devaluing work. If what is created is only to be consumed and ends up back in the cycle of decay, the activity of creating it is labour. What is left is not a society of workers exercising a craft but a society of labourers who consider whatever they do primarily as a way to sustain their own lives and those of their families. The transformation of the whole society into a labouring society permeates human existence with a necessity and sameness – humanity – human beings as public actors, as unique individuals – is threatened with extinction.

- Action - Arendt reserves the word action for only a small subset of the full variety of human doings and efforts – action is closely connected with 'speech' for only man "…can communicate himself". [There is future potential to explore the bridge that Arendt builds between Wittgenstein's description of the linguistic turn and Habermas' theory of "Communicative Action" (Habermas, 1977)]. She goes onto argue, that man can live without either labouring or working (you could pay someone to labour for you and choose not to produce anything durable) but that a life without speech and action has ceased to be a human life "…because it is no longer lived among men." *(sic)* The truly human condition then, she argues, lies within a web of human relationships and it is what happens 'in-between' people, which is valuable. Arendt argued

that practical wisdom (*phronêsis*), the primary intellectual virtue of deliberation concerned with action, is not merely concerned with the selection of means, as is *technê* or art. Rather, in deliberating, the man of practical wisdom, the *phronimos,* is more concerned with finding what is good for himself and his fellow citizens. (Villa, 1996, p.32). This represents the highest sphere of human engagement especially in co-operation and discussion. It is only in the life of action as opposed to abstract thought that humans become fully authentic and is the only realm where it is possible to achieve excellence. Action for Arendt must involve initiating a new beginning – *natality* (Arendt, 1958, p.9) What I find particularly exciting about Arendt's discussion of *action* is the idea that human activity itself *creates* new beginnings. She steps away from Heidegger's rather pessimistic focus on *mortality* by stressing *natality.* Humans acting together give birth to new ideas and understandings from within the already existing set of ideas and understandings from which they come and move them onwards. New stories are created through people acting together. One of the consequences of *natality* is that any new understanding is fleeting, for it will cause people within this web of relationships to think and behave in new ways, which in turn will cause others to have new understandings ad infinitum. There is no product as such but the human condition moves on.

Application to child protection social work

It is precisely this hopefulness in the capacity of humans to create new stories

that I believe offers healthy prospects for social work. Too often we try to tie people down as fitting within a certain category, conforming to a set of behaviours that we understand as relating to a particular essential condition. Once we have fixed this understanding we have a sense that we can 'know' what it is to be that person and how to work with them to either change their behaviour or situation or to recognise it as being beyond redemption. In recent years child protection social work has relied heavily upon attachment theory as first described by Bowlby and subsequent theorists (Howe et al, 1999; Shemmings & Shemmings, 2011). The idea that the nature of the relationship a child forms with their primary caregiver in the first few years of life sets their patterns of behaviours and relationships for the rest of their lives is an attractive yet potentially toxic one. Social workers stress the criticality of the early years and frequently see parents who had difficult childhoods themselves as therefore incapable of change. Social work interventions then seek to break the chain of insecure attachments often by removing children and placing them in new relationships with primary caregivers judged as being able to promote a secure attachment. Whilst this approach is beginning to gather a more critical appraisal (e.g. Wastell & White, 2012) we need to have new understandings to challenge scientific determinism.

I feel that Arendt can begin to inform this search by recognising that we can't rely upon the simple application of high theory to very complex webs of relationships. Simply taking people through child protection processes is simply to subject them to social *labour.* Nor can we necessarily rely upon straightforward technical solutions to dynamic, uncertain, human issues, for as

soon as we have *acted* with people we have set off a new chain of meanings and understandings that that person will draw upon in acting in the world. We can't therefore understand their lives as products of social *work* as those are fleeting. We have to engage with people in a form of social *action,* responding to their evolving condition and recognising the new understandings we are generating in-between us.

Arendt invites us to try to understand each individual's unique perspective on their lives and to avoid slipping into a belief that there is a fixed human nature that is essential and predictive. This is a phenomenological understanding of the human condition that recognises the potential for new beginnings. While there will always be child protection concerns so severe that we may not be able to safely allow parents to care for a particular child or children at this point in their lives, allowing ourselves to believe that people can change and may be able to successfully parent in the future is particularly important. As Broadhurst and Mason (2013) argue, casting women as 'maternal outcasts' subject to successive compulsory removals of their children raises many ethical, legal and practical challenges to social work practitioners. It is also extremely resource intensive and logjams child protection team caseloads and the family courts.

Approaching service users as consistently capable of change also allows practice wisdom to be used in a positive direction towards keeping families together, solving problems, finding new ways to behave and creating new stories. This is inherently a more satisfactory and satisfying way to practice social work and also I would argue a more human way to live and practice – immersing ourselves

in *action* with our fellow human beings. We need to thus remove ourselves to a sufficient distance to recognize that some of what we do currently are not 'activities' but 'processes' which remove us from engagement with the people who use our services and to heed Arendt's warning that:

> "It is quite conceivable that the modern age – which began with such an unprecedented and promising outburst of human activity – may end in the deadliest, most sterile passivity history has ever known." (1958, p.322)

Arendt's analysis shows that theory is displaced not by *action* but by *work* and ultimately *labour* – the ideal of fabrication gives new impetus to cognitive pursuits in the direction of natural science – in which knowing is intimately tied to making (Higgins, 2011) Thus even as work (whose products include tools) helps to lighten our labour, it creates a 'second task of labouring' in order to maintain the system. Recent innovation within child protection work is towards a series of approaches that rely heavily on such tools aimed at enabling engagement with service users. While I welcome coherent approaches to engaging with children and their families (Author, 2013a, 2013b) there is a real and present danger that social workers will rely only on their knowledge (*technê)* of the tools and their application and thus become 'technicians'. The other danger is that practice will become measured not by the quality of the analysis but by the completion of the task and I have already heard of social workers criticized by managers for not having completed and placed a "Three Houses Tool" on a child's record, even when the child was pre-lingual and the

tool therefore inappropriate. Again, we reduce *action* to *work* to *labour*. Arendt (1958, p. 196) claimed that "…interpretation of action in terms of making, actually spoils the action itself and its true result, the relationship it should have established."

In constructing people as 'service users' we are already to some extent reducing their humanity to that of, at best, 'consumers' of social work labour. However, as Featherstone et al (2014, p.96) remind us "…Arendt identified the treatment of humanity as superfluous as beginning whenever people are reduced to a state, for example of being homeless or socially burdensome." There is also a danger that in reducing practice to the technical application of tools, we reduce children and families to 'products' or even 'consumables'. (Ruch et al, 2010; Garrett, 2009)

The measurement of social work outcomes seems to me equally problematic. At what point can we measure the outcomes of a person's life – Arendt would say only when they are dead. (Arendt, 1958, p.192). According to Higgins, (2011, p.100) '…the frailty of action lies in its unpredictability, its irreversibility and its evanescence.". Human action can't be undone but its meaning will be persistently re-interpreted. In 'completing' a social work assessment and placing it on permanent record we are attempting to fix an understanding of the people who are its subjects and then formulate a piece of work towards stated outcomes. Assessments conducted within the domain of child protection in the current climate tend to focus on 'risk factors' and plan outcomes that either reduce or remove those risks. Featherstone et al, (2014) see the child-centred risk

paradigm as highly problematic ethically. They go on to argue that practices rooted in this approach are likely to leave children less safe. I agree, for to reduce complex and dynamic webs of relationships to a few isolated SMART targets is to fail to recognize, as Arendt does, the limits of our abilities to solve equations with too many variables. Action is 'boundless' and resonates beyond its immediate context (Higgins, 2011).

Better then to engage in relationships with families that enable us to sustain a continually evolving understanding of what is happening and to effect change based upon dynamic action within the situation (Hall, 2012). While I might disagree with some of the theoretical underpinnings of Ruch et al's (2010) articulation, I fully support theirs and Ferguson's (2005) assertion that placing the relationship at the heart of social work practice enables the worker to move beyond surface understandings and as intrinsically valuable as an intervention in its own right.

Conclusions

Broadhurst and Mason, (2014) label the 'informational turn' as tethering social workers to their computer workstations at the expense of investing in the skills of direct work with children and families. There has been extensive critique of this reduction of social work to labour – feeding the Integrated Children's System (Parton, 2008, White et al, 2008). However, Broadhurst and Mason (2014) feel that there is a resurgence of interest in embodied ways of knowing. It seems to me that the argument is a turn away from theoretical and technical rationality

toward *phronêsis*, which according to Gillespie (in Dreyfus and Wrathall (2009, p.359) was a decisive step in the development of both existentialism and phenomenology.

Martinez-Brawley & Mendez – Bonita Zorita (1998) argue that social work actions should be guided not by formal theory but a form of reflection that generates a unique theory in action, or *praxis*. Thompson (2005, p.69) similarly states "Theory provides us with the cloth from which to tailor our garment, it does not provide 'off the peg' solutions to practice problems." My reading of Arendt, coupled with my own practice experience leads me to assert that it is even more fundamental than that. We weave our own cloth. When engaging with a new family who need social work services we pick out the strands relevant to the situation drawing from: sociology, psychology, professional and personal values, practice experience, intuition, common sense, legislation, policy, compassion, control etc. Assessment helps us to determine what strands are pertinent to our engagement with these particular service users and analysis helps us to decide what to do with which strands; which to pick up, which to leave, in which order to put them together. We generate a new understanding about each family's needs and how to help them, aiming to weave particular relationships and valuing those relationships for their inherent worth. We need theory as a region of thought rather than tool, we need to *labour* in order to maintain the system, we need to *work* with service users toward their goals but ultimately we need to be involved in *action* with children and families in order to enable new meanings to be formed. I fear however, that we will ultimately only be measured by how much we *labour.*

5112 Words.

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