The University of Sheffield

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Phenomenological Understandings of Child & Family Social Work in England: Provisional imperatives and infinite responsibilities.

For the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by published work

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Phenomenological understandings of Child & Family Social Work in England:

Provisional imperatives and infinite responsibilities.

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by published work

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Curriculum Vitae

Abstract

This PhD by publication submission comprises six peer reviewed journal articles and a thematic essay that take a critical perspective on social work's use of theory derived from sociological and psychological perspectives. This thesis will draw upon phenomenology to make the case that social work should focus, first of all, on the lived experience of the people who use its services and to prioritise the meanings they make of their experiences prior to applying external theoretical 'professional' meanings. Theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas offer a theoretical framework that sees the human condition as embodied in the social world and therefore consisting of plural accounts of experience that do not easily lend themselves to oversimplified ontic descriptions of the social or psychological realms that claim to explain the commonalities of 'humanity'. I will argue that adopting this position allows social work to develop a more ethical mode of practice based on Levinasian ideas about ethics preceding knowledge and extending that argument into provisional, rather than categorical, imperatives and assuming an infinite responsibility that extends beyond completion of social work 'interventions'. Hence social work's need to develop and build theory ideographically rather than nomothetic application and the need for social workers to be *theorists* rather than *theoreticians.*

Acknowledgements

Thank you to my academic advisor, Dr Michaela Rogers for her support and encouragement and a prodigious work rate that always amazes.

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Thank you to Tom and Lily for being amazing and making me proud. I love you.

Thank you to my beautiful wonderful wife Liza for supporting me unerringly for 33 years. I love you more than I can say.

1. List of published work comprising submission

1. Smeeton, J. (2015) "From Aristotle to Arendt: A phenomenological exploration of forms of knowledge and practice in the context of child protection social work in the UK" in Qualitative Social Work 16 (1) 14-28 https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015603479

2. Ward, J. & Smeeton, J. (2017) "The end of non-consensual adoption: promoting the well-being of children in care" in Practice: Social Work in Action 29 (1) 55 73 https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2016.1164131

3. Smeeton, J. & Ward, J. (2017) "It's a big deal being given a person: why people who experience infertility may choose not to adopt" Adoption and Fostering 41 (3) 215-227 https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575917705819

4. Smeeton, J. (2018) "A Murky Business": A phenomenological ontology of risk in child protection social work in the UK in Qualitative Social Work. 0(0) 1–17 https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325018815732

5. Smeeton, J. & O'Connor, P. (2019) "Embodied Social Work Practice in Risk Society" in Journal of Social Work. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017319860800

6. Smeeton, J. (2019) "In search of social work's post-risk paradigm" in Social Work and Social Sciences Review. 20 (3) 34-49

2. Declaration of authorship for co-authored submissions

I confirm that the portfolio that I am presenting includes co-authored publications. Within these co-authored publications, I declare, with the agreement of each of my co-authors, the following as being my individual contributions to the articles:

1. Smeeton, J. (2015) "From Aristotle to Arendt: A phenomenological exploration of forms of knowledge and practice in the context of child protection social work in the UK" in Qualitative Social Work 16 (1) 14-28 https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325015603479. I am the sole author of this paper – **100%**

2. Ward, J. & Smeeton, J. (2017) "The end of non-consensual adoption: promoting the well-being of children in care" in Practice: Social Work in Action 29 (1) 55-73 https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2016.1164131. I was the 2nd author on this paper and claim my contribution as **50%.** Ward had initiated the paper and managed the submission but I contributed the bulk of the body of the paper.

3. Smeeton, J. & Ward, J. (2017) "It's a big deal being given a person: why people who experience infertility may choose not to adopt" Adoption and Fostering 41 (3) 215-227 https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575917705819. I was 1st author on this paper and managed the submission and modifications and claim **70%.** I had also designed the study, managed the ethics process and ran the online quantitative element of the study and reported upon it.

4. Smeeton, J. (2018) "A Murky Business": A phenomenological ontology of risk in child protection social work in the UK in Qualitative Social Work. 0(0) 1–17 https://doi.org/10.1177/1473325018815732. I am the sole author on this paper and claim **100%.**

5. Smeeton, J. & O'Connor, P. (2019) "Embodied Social Work Practice in Risk Society" in Journal of Social Work. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017319860800. I was the main author on this paper and managed the submission and modifications and claim

80%. O'Connor contributed towards specific elements of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology.

6. Smeeton, J. (2019) "In search of social work's post-risk paradigm" in Social Work and Social Sciences Review. 20 (3) 34-49. I am the sole author of this paper and claim **100%**

Signed:

Date: 19/11/2020

3. Introduction

"It is perfectly true as the philosophers say that life must be understood backwards. But they forget the other proposition, that it must be lived forwards" (Søren Kierkegaard, 1843)

Growing up as a young carer for a parent with Multiple Sclerosis and managing another parent who was violent, gave me some particular experiences of childhood and parenting that often attract professional interest. For myself, the boundaries between parent and child, carer and cared for, seemed out of kilter with my contemporaries. This did not provide me with any particular insights or truths about the world but required me to engage from a very early point in questioning *normal*. The world for me has always therefore felt *absurd,* so when I stumbled upon Sartre and Camus in my early adulthood, I was able for the first time to locate my questions in a positionality to the world and to appropriate their language in order to form those questions.

Circumstances required that I work from the age of 15 in a working man's club and because school was another arena for constant clashes between how I understood the world and the truths I was supposed to replicate, we parted ways as soon as I was 16. I collected glasses and worked behind the bar for 2 years full-time but had scraped enough 'O'-levels to get a traineeship in the NHS as a Medical Physics & Physiological Measurement Technician at the age of 18. Thus, began an adulthood characterised by full-time work and part-time study or part-time work and full-time study, from which I have not yet emerged as I hit 60. After 7 years in the Health Service I trained to be a primary teacher which disavowed me of any hope that the compulsory education system could be anything but limiting and constraining so, after a brief period teaching adults with learning disabilities in further education, I drifted into residential social work with looked after children. I worked in a number of roles in residential care/care leaver services for 8 years prior to completing my Diploma in Social Work at the University of Sheffield, which introduced me, for the first time, to sociology as a discipline. Added to the biological and psychological understandings of child development from medical and educational perspectives I

felt, at first, as if I had the full theoretical base in order to understand what it was to be human.

My time as a child & family social worker, team manager and then academic has given me space to explore judgments about parenting and try to reconcile the ontological and epistemological underpinnings that social workers use in order to make decisions. I have often asked myself the question: "Would I have taken my younger self into care?" and the answer has changed as I have gone through my career based upon how I was trying to understand the quality and value of a situated childhood and the related stresses on parenting. There was a time when I used attachment theory as the main tool for judgment and its certainty was a welcome anchor. Working in that frame would have led me to rescue my younger self and probably place me into the precarity of the 1960s care system. When I consider my childhood as relatively typical of the class, ethnicity and gender norms of the times and myself as performing the roles expected of me by the society of the time, then I move towards leaving me at home (although with support). When I consider philosophically who I have become and who I am becoming I feel privileged to have had the experiences I have, for without them I would have made different choices. Parenting my own children through to adulthood also gave me space to discover whether I would simply replicate my own experiences of being parented; would draw upon the social capital afforded by my professional class; or embrace the agency in accepting my existential freedom to decide how to parent and to focus on the emotionality that is often pathologized out of human relationships in reductive understandings.

I have therefore come to question traditional knowledge bases that seem to be informing social work and would like to use this thesis to develop a critical stance towards both sociology and psychology as ways of understanding social work with children & their families and to champion phenomenology as an appropriate attitude to understanding. The critical stance is not oppositional but seeks to recognise the relevant contributions from, and limits of, sociology and psychology which, if allowed to run unchecked, too easily become deterministic. I conclude that through phenomenology, social work can straddle and incorporate sociology and psychology in order to help people transcend their contingencies.

A theme throughout my work has been the relationship between theory and practice and how one informs the other in decision-making. I hope through this work to explore that relationship and to problematise giving either *a priori* status. There are similar problematic binaries often thrown up between social work as *art* or *science;* and the social world as *real* or *constructed.* Again, I hope to find, at best, resolutions or, at worst, to minimise their significance in trying to get to the nub of social work's *telos,* to find meaning in people's experience and help them negotiate their reality safely and successfully. However, I do hope to introduce a distinction between social workers as *theorists*, workers who generate understandings, or as *theoreticians,* workers who apply existing ways to understand.

I began on this path from my MA Social Research thesis which focused on birth parents' experiences of social work through care and adoption proceedings (Smeeton & Boxall, 2011) (I will not use this paper as it falls outside of the timescale for the PhD by Published Works but it will feature as a referenced paper due to its relevance to other work). I adopted Schutz's phenomenology (Schutz,1970; Moustakas, 1994) as a research methodology in order to prioritise the birth parents' stories of their experiences. The approach fitted with my previously developed interest in existentialism and the considerable overlap between the two has provided me with a rich seam to mine in subsequent work. I am increasingly convinced that social work theory tears itself between sociological and psychological ways to understand the human condition and, I will argue, is always therefore left missing important ways to think about what is happening for people who are sentient, active agents in their own lives.

I undertook an MA in Philosophy in order to explore that and this thesis will further draw upon phenomenology to make the case that social work should focus, first of all, on the lived experience of the people who use its services and to prioritise the meanings they make prior to applying external theoretical 'professional' meanings. Theorists such as Hannah Arendt, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Emmanuel Levinas offer a theoretical framework that sees the human condition as embodied in the social world and therefore consisting of plural accounts of experience that do not easily lend themselves to oversimplified ontic descriptions of

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sociological or psychological realms that claim to explain the commonalities of 'humanity'. I will argue that adopting this position allows social work to develop a more ethical mode of practice based on Levinasian ideas about ethics preceding knowledge and therefore the need for provisional, rather than categorical, imperatives and assuming an infinite responsibility that extends beyond completion of social work 'interventions.' Hence social work's need to develop and build theory idiographically rather than nomothetic application of existing theory. This distinction was originally described by Windelband who argued that the natural sciences seek out general laws (nomothetic) while social sciences seek to describe unique events (idiographic knowledge) (Schwandt, 1997)

A lot of my work has focused on the decision-making that takes place around adoption and I think this has a particularly stark focus where questions of belonging and situated embodiment can be ontologically examined. That many of these decisions are made within a social work *mood* of anxiety (paper, 4 - Smeeton, 2018) due to the contingencies of risk society (Beck, 1992) opens them up more closely to examination and questioning. I have not yet written explicitly about the ethical position I take but intend to use this thematic essay to develop my ethical position and to use that as the spine of the thesis, attaching my published works as ribs along the way. In doing so I will seek to argue that social work needs to engage with the ontology of the human condition, while exploring the ethical work that arises from that position. If we have no position on what it is to be human within the world, how can we set out what a good life should be? I will explore the relative positions of Levinas, Arendt and Heidegger regarding whether ethics should precede knowledge, precede action or if ethics and ontology are essentially the same project, and to consider the implications for social work.

3.1. Structure of the commentary

I made an early decision to use this thesis as a way of wrapping up the natural progression that my work was taking by focusing the bulk of the commentary on new work looking at phenomenological approaches to ethics. I intend to reform this into a journal article once the PhD is completed. This decision has probably resulted in an unevenly balanced thematic essay that has to keep reminding itself to return to being a PhD by Published works. I have therefore put the bulk of the new material into chapters 4.2 and 4.3 and used the other chapters to draw the whole body of work together. The inclusion of so much new material has limited the commentary on the published work, but I do feel it is necessary to draw it into one coherent whole. I have therefore put some information into an appendix to show how my work has been used by others and I hope that table is actually a more useful tool than trying to comment upon every paper's citations individually. Copies of the published works themselves appear in the hard copies directly after this thematic essay but the assumption of the thematic essay is that they have been read prior to it.

3.2. Coherence and significance of the work

Table 1: Main contribution of each of the articles in 5 domains

Article	Domain 1: Contributions to an empirical knowledge base for child & family social work practice	Domain 2: Theoretical contributions	Domain 3: The ethical spine	Domain 4: Epistemology	Domain 5: Methodological contributions	Domain 6: Contributions to broader policy debates and understandings related to child & family social work
1		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
2	✓	✓				✓
3	✓		✓			✓
4		✓	✓		✓	✓
5		✓	✓		✓	✓
6		✓	✓		✓	✓

4. Contributions

4.1. Empirical contributions – Papers 2 and 3

This chapter deals with papers 2 (Ward & Smeeton, 2017) and 3 (Smeeton & Ward, 2017) which were both written with a colleague from Nottingham Trent University. At the time I was the second supervisor for her Professional Doctorate which was focused on the issue of permanence for looked after children. She had previously worked as an adoption team manager and was on the whole in favour of adoption for children. Paper 2 originated as a chapter in her doctorate setting out the policy position in relation to adoption and led us to a lengthy debate about its use which we resolve through this joint paper. We intended it as a pros & cons discussion where she took the positive stance and I the critical, a position I had arrived at through working on Smeeton & Boxall (2011), which tried to elucidate the birth parent's phenomenological experience of care and adoption proceedings.

My contribution to the paper included the legal, ethical and empirical challenges to adoption from which I concluded that adoption does not easily represent the 'happy ever after' narrative that is often claimed for it and that its very presence in the panoply of disposals displaces other options unfairly. Indeed, I argued that it 'cherry-picked' the children most likely to settle into placement. I also concluded that the impact upon birth family was so damaging that on balance non-consensual adoption was not ethically justifiable and that other options needed to be more actively developed. This paper remains my most downloaded paper from open access platforms and has attracted a wide range of interest from journalists, birth families and other academics across the world (see appendix). It led directly to my involvement in a documentary looking at the links between homelessness and the loss of children to adoption, work that I would dearly love to follow up in the near future.

The work for paper 3 was commissioned by Family Care which was a Midlands based adoption agency who were looking to increase their pool of adopters. They believed that many childless couples who had been unsuccessful in becoming

parents through new reproductive technologies were not applying to be adopters. They asked us to investigate why that might be. My contribution was to design the study, write the data collection instruments, conduct the quantitative element, conduct one of the interviews, and to manage the submission of the paper. We jointly analysed the qualitative interviews and co-wrote the bulk of the paper in equal measure. My colleague managed the bulk of the literature review and I wrote the discussion.

This paper doesn't sit easily within my larger corpus as it is an empirical piece of work that has an implicit acceptance of adoption, which as you will see, is not fully supported by the rest of my work and indeed the conclusions of this thesis. However, I feel it does belong here due to its use of phenomenology as an empirical approach, used mainly for the qualitative elements but which also featured in the survey which included lots of open dialogue elements. The aim of the paper was to listen to the experience of people who had considered adoption as a way of becoming parents. Our ambitions for the work were perhaps larger than the small budget warranted and so it remained a small-scale initial investigation into the area, but still I think it identified some interesting elements that are important for considering what does it mean to be a parent and exploration of family forms? Within 6 months this had become the most downloaded paper in the journal's history and it still attracts attention directly from the journal and also from open access sites. It too appeals to further work and I would particularly like to explore the parallels between the experience of adopter/adoptees and donor conceived people and their social and biological parents. I think Heideggarian ontology could be used effectively here to look at 'family' and subjectivity, but more empirical work would need to proceed that analysis.

4.2. Theoretical contributions – The phenomenological attitude – Papers 1,4,5,6

> *"…human beings are not born once and for all on the day their mothers gave birth to them…life obliges them over and over again to give birth to themselves" (Gabriel Garcia Marquez, 1985:165)*

It is important to acknowledge that my line of argument did not emerge fully formed but draws upon a number of strong traditions and positions towards practice that have informed my thinking and, by re-examining them, recognising the common roots to my own thought. I am particularly reminded of Parton & O'Byrne's (2000) description of 'Constructive Social Work' and its central message that it is the quality and value of the experience of social work rather than any particular model or technique that is most effective in sustaining change. Moreover, in combining a narrative approach with solution-focused work, they argue that it is talk and language that are key to making sense and taking control of lives for it is via language that the individual self is formed. Parton & O'Byrne root their approach in an understanding that the social world is constructed as described by Berger and Luckman (1967) in *The Social Construction of Reality.* This work drew upon the phenomenology of Husserl and Schutz to posit a central thesis that:

> '…individuals in interaction create social worlds through their linguistic, symbolic activity for the purpose of providing coherence and purpose to an essentially open-ended, unformed human existence.' (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000: 16)

Society is therefore argued to be a symbolic construct composed of ideas, meanings and language constantly changing through human action and offering constraints and possibilities to its active members. By taking an active role in social worlds, people assign 'meaning' to their experiences. The emphasis therefore is on the processes through which people define themselves and their environments in constructing social realities. Here we need to address how this is distinctive from a more sociological approach by addressing some key theorists.

Sociology's stock-in-trade is to focus upon social environments that emerge when humans interact. The more complex these interactions become the more they develop into organized structures and they are described or ascribed power in their operations in a way that is thought to constrain freedom and limit potential. Margaret Archer (cited in Ritzer, 1992) argues that dealing with the problem of agency and structure is the central problem of social theory and Ritzer (1992) recognises how the work of a number of theorists has tried to deal with it: Gidden's Structuration Theory; Archer's interest in morphogenesis and the linkage between culture and agency; Bourdieu's habitus and field, Habermas's effort to integrate the life-world and system; Burns' social rule theory system; Lukes' power and structure; Abrams' historical structuring, Tourraine's self-production of society; and Crozier and Friedberg's game-theory approach. I don't address all of these here.

Existential/phenomenological traditions have some scepticism toward this duality but still recognise the contingencies to freedom. As I argued in paper 5 (Smeeton & O-Connor, 2019) Merleau-Ponty believed that we need to take freedom into account but that freedom is constituted by the way we live and adapt to the world of meanings where some of those meanings are already chosen for us. "We are condemned to meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002:xxiii).

> "My actual social environment refers always to a horizon of potential social environments, and we may speak of a transcendent infinity of the social world as we speak of a transcendent infinity of the natural one." Schutz (1970:246)

In order to accept the agency/structure problem requires an acceptance of its duality, that the agent and the structural contingencies that put limits upon it are ontologically separated. In my adoption of Heidegger's *Dasein* as the fundamental ontological unit of the human condition, I am rejecting this duality. Our *being-in-the-world* is the only unit that presents itself. The human being both shapes and is shaped by its environment.

> "I find myself at any moment of my existence as being within nature and within society; both are permanently co-constitutive elements of my biographical

situation and are therefore, experienced as inescapably belonging to it. On the other hand, they constitute the framework within which alone I have the freedom of my potentialities, and this means they prescribe the scope of all possibilities for defining my situation. In this sense they are not elements of my situation, but determinations of it…. I have to take them for granted [and]…I have to come to terms with them." (Schutz, 1970:246)

This is in contrast with many sociological concepts of the agency/structure problem which accept the duality and speak of a dialectic between the human subject and the environment. The contentions arise between structuralists and phenomenologists around the relative contributions of structure and agency, which Bourdieu (1977) attempted to unite in "Outline of a Theory of Practice." Bourdieu (1977) describes it as a concern for the relationship between *habitus* (an internalized mental structure through which people deal with the social world) and *field* (a network of relations among objective positions). Bourdieu states his aim to make possible a "…science of the dialectical relations between the objective structures to which the objectivist mode of knowledge gives access and the structured dispositions within which those structures are actualised and which tend to reproduce them." (1977:3) According to Bourdieu the structure of the field serves to constrain agents and while the field contains the habitus, the habitus also constitutes the field forming a dialectical relationship. There is not space here to develop a more thorough critique, other than to raise the possibility that in developing a rigorous objective science of the social world "…independent of individual consciousnesses and wills," Bourdieu (1977:4) may be reifying *field* as an object of study. Bourdieu's attempt to draw upon and to some extent reconcile the phenomenological traditions of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty with the structuralism of Levi-Strauss give rise to a theory of practice which sociology continues to develop. We should remind ourselves here of Levi-Strauss' attempt at "making it possible to disregard the subject – that unbearably spoilt child who has occupied the philosophical scene for too long now and prevented serious research through demanding exclusive attention" (Levi-Strauss, 1971 cited in Doja, 2008:87).

Jenkins (2002) offers a thorough detailed critique of Bourdieu and particularly points out the more than passing resemblance to the structural functionalism of Talcott

Parsons. From this position it is hard to account for how any individual can achieve anything close to escape velocity from the gravity of structures that define them, given the "…close reproductive link between the subjectivities of the habitus and objectivity of the social world it is difficult not to perceive them as bound together in a closed feedback loop, each confirming the other" (Jenkins, 2002:82).

Habermas (1987, cited in Edgar, 2006) constructs the agency/structure problem as the system's "colonization of the life-world" ie. that as structures grow in independence and power, they exert control over the life-world. While he would accept that systems in modern society are necessary and beneficial to a degree, when they intrude into the regulation of private and public activities their instrumentalism erodes the communicative skills that serve to maintain the lifeworld. Good intentions here are perverted by the system (Edgar, 2006).

Giddens' structuration theory starts from the structuralist position (Ritzer, 1992:225) recognising structure as both constraining and enabling. Gidden's (1984, cited in Ritzer, 1992: 570) posits that "…activities are not produced by consciousness, by the social construction of reality, nor are they produced by social structure. Rather, in expressing themselves as actors, people are engaging in practice, and it is through that practice that both consciousness and structure are produced." So, structure only exists in and through the activities of human agents and is not therefore outside or external to human action. "Structure is what gives form and shape to human life, but it is not *itself* that form and shape" (Giddens, 1989:256 cited in Ritzer, 1992:572). He doesn't deny that structure can be constraining on action but feels that sociologists have exaggerated the importance of this constraint.

> "In interpretative sociologies, action and meaning are accorded primacy in the explication of human conduct; structural concepts are not notably prominent, and there is not much talk of constraint. For functionalism and structuralism, however, structure (in the divergent senses attributed to that concept) has primacy over action, and the constraining qualities of structure are strongly accentuated." (Giddens, 1984:3)

Giddens' structuration theory sits well with my argument for phenomenology's focus on human meaning rather than social structure and though Giddens does maintain there is a duality of agency and structure in dialectical relationship, even he recognised that only phenomenology and ethnomethodology provide '…detailed and subtle treatments of the nature of practical consciousness. Indeed, it is these schools of thought…which have been responsible for making clear the shortcomings of orthodox social scientific theories in this respect" (Giddens, 1984:8). This argument supports the decision to root my argument in philosophy rather than sociology due to the limitations recognised even by the most eminent of sociologists:

> "I have no cures for the ills of sociology. A multitude of myopias limit the glimpse we get of our subject matter. To define one source of blindness and bias as central is engagingly optimistic." (Goffman, 1983:235)

Parton & O'Byrne's (2000) description of Constructive Social Work is certainly closer to interpretative sociology than functional or structural and in claiming a kind of 'affirmative' rather than 'sceptical' postmodernism, they (2000: 24) argue for a constructive approach to practice that allows 'truth redefinition' which is interpretative and prioritises receptivity, dialogue, listening and talking which reveals paradox and myth and invites the possible. I am struck by the essentially phenomenological nature of 'constructive social work' in seeking to understand the lived experience of service users through: problematising the 'taken-for-granted' recognising that categories and concepts are historically and culturally specific; understanding that knowledge of the world is developed in daily interactions with others; and finally acknowledging that because the social world is the product of social processes there is therefore no given determined human nature. These key characteristics are familiar to readers of Husserl, Heidegger, Arendt and Merleau-Ponty as common tenets of their phenomenology. However, 'constructive social work' seeks to move beyond simply undertaking and understanding the human condition towards creating new narratives, which echoes Arendt's (1958) call to action in *The Human Condition,* and her concept of *natality,* which I have described in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015).

Parton & O'Byrne (2000) recognise that some service users may have complex past narratives about their lives but that these should not be allowed to be the only

narratives and that "Gaps in stories are filled partly by new lived experiences and so lives evolve in ways similar to the re-writing of texts; we enter the story and re-story it daily."(2000:54) This puts a particular emphasis on the quality of the story-telling and the choice of words becomes important in telling those stories if we are to avoid getting knotted up by a misuse of words. This draws upon Wittgenstein's (1963 and 1968 cited in Parton & O'Byrne, 2000) 'linguistic turn' for, according to Parton & O'Byrne:

> 'Language therefore is a way of relating, like a handshake. With it we can include or exclude people. But when it comes to understanding the meaning of words, this is ever-changing and we rely greatly on the contexts in which they are used.' (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000: 55)

There is future potential within my own work to explore the centrality of language through following the phenomenological argument between Heidegger, who asserted that language is 'the house of being' and Jaspers who saw language as a bridge between people (Bakewell, 2016: 192). However, to explore this element too deeply would necessarily draw me towards phenomenology's post-modern extension with its central focus on language. Derrida's (1997) homage *"Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas"* acknowledges his own debt to phenomenology, Foucault similarly described himself as a Nietszchean (Westfall & Rosenberg, 2018) and Lyotard's first published work was a textbook on phenomenology (Lyotard, 1954 trans 1991), so the links are strong, yet I hesitate. I think my hesitation is due to my current focus on the issue of embodiment and ontology which I think can be more fully explored through phenomenology. Post-modernity disembodies experience through its focus on language and is therefore in danger of ignoring the visceral, sensuous experiences of the body that I have begun to discuss in paper 5 (Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019) much of which remains either un-narrated or is only partially articulated in language. Merleau-Ponty (cited in Mazis, 2016:9) stated that philosophy "does not seek a verbal substitute for the world we see". He insisted that there needed to be room for a meaning-laden silence, accessing immediate embodied existence. Much of Levinas's work is highly dependent upon Merleau-Ponty's descriptions of embodiment which, for Levinas, is an openness to the mortality of others. "The significance of embodiment is neither attachment to self nor

attachment to being but rather vulnerability to the other, hence moral compassion."
(Cohen, 2006:xxxiii)

Constructive Social Work draws upon Wittgenstein in eschewing causative explanations for people's situations which seek to explain people as having 'problems'. Problems therefore simply happen in a circular/interactional way that isn't informed by seeking an aetiology or to hold anyone to blame. There is a little to gain from asking 'why is the problem present?' but to rather seek to construct a solution. Wittgenstein's belief that "It often happens that we only become aware of important facts if we suppress the question 'why?'; and then in the course of investigations these facts lead to an answer" (cited in Parton & O'Byrne, 2000:65) In describing De Shazer's thinking they say that he builds upon this by arguing that in asking 'why?' we are more likely to focus on our own theories rather than listening to the meanings brought to the problem by the service user themselves. In paper 4 (Smeeton, 2018) I posit a similar argument about the role of 'risk' in moving the gaze away from the service user's, toward the social worker's, concerns by creating a mood of anxiety that permeates practice. Within that paper I propose that where the state does have legitimate concerns for children that we use language that reflects the experiences of the child and the family. Children do not experience risk – that is a professional's concern. Children experience *harm* and have *needs*. Their carers may also have *needs* and together with the environment may present *hazards.* Language can help to move the focus back to the child's experiences and concerns.

I also have a strong affinity to feminist traditions within social work. The most obvious synapse between feminism and phenomenology/existentialism is, of course, De Beauvoir in her seminal text *The Second Sex* (1949), however, the conversation between the two traditions continues. While noting many divergences between her own perspectives and those of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, Code (1991) notes many possibilities for dialogue between feminists and phenomenologists which are worthy of note. Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty both reject the autonomy-of-reason model, arguing that all knowing is permeated with mood, feeling, sensibility, affectivity. Both ground their analyses in experience, praxis and embodied existence which give precedent to useful knowledge in the everyday world. They also concentrate on *particular* experiences or specific modes of existence. They argue

that perception engages all the senses and, as I previously argued in paper 5 (Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019), Merleau-Ponty's position is that the body extends across the tool it utilises. Thus, when we adopt a conceptual tool such as a particular methodology, the inherent flaws of that tool become part of our own practices and understandings unless we are reflexively aware of the flaws and do active work to minimise them. Both Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty "…offer an account of being in the world which resonates with the activities of moral and epistemic subjects who know and understand by positioning and repositioning themselves within a situation in order to understand its implications and see in those implications contextualised, situated reasons for action."(Code, 1991, p.148). Phenomenology presents a caution to splitting the lived experiences of human beings:

> "Intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty argues, over-emphasises the conceptual content of our experience, and empiricism over-emphasises a passive theory of the human being, where the human is a passive recipient of external sensory data, and ultimately can be understood in a limited naturalistic or behavioural way. Such approaches effectively dismember the human being from the world, splitting our understanding of lived experience into an objective and subjective one". (Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019:10)

Throughout my work I have a healthy scepticism to truth claims presented by any universalising theory or methodology rooted in a deep mistrust of the rush to objectivity that accompany such approaches. Chief among them is scientific methodology which ignores the phenomenological aspects of whatever lies before it throughout its 'malestream' epistemology (Code, 1991:12).

> "Science manipulates things and gives up living in them. Operating within its own realm, it makes its constructs of things; operating upon these indices or variables to effect whatever transformations are permitted by their definition, it comes face to face with the real world only at rare intervals. It is, and always has been, that admirably active, ingenious, and bold way of thinking whose fundamental bias is to treat everything as though it were an object-in-

general—as though it meant nothing to us and yet was predestined for our ingenious schemes." (Merleau-Ponty, 1964. p.1)

Schutz (1970) embraced Husserl's conviction that none of the so-called rigorous sciences can lead to an understanding of our experiences of the world whose existence they uncritically pre-suppose and "…which they pretend to measure by yardsticks and pointers on the scale of their instruments." Schutz argued that many of the questions the social sciences attempt to answer require a philosophical analysis that he draws from Husserl's phenomenology.

As Houston (2014) points out, a number of social theorists considered as having currency within social work, such as Berger & Luckmann and Bourdieu draw heavily from the phenomenology of Husserl, Schutz & Merleau-Ponty, and to a lesser acknowledged extent from Heidegger (who attracts a heavy critique from Bourdieu (1996) for his political ontology). Houston (2014) follows Heidegger in arguing for the primacy of ontology as a way for social work to move from surface to depth in order to understand the human condition and lived experience. This thesis will ultimately address the claim for primacy that Heidegger makes for *ontology* and compare that with Levinas' argument for *ethics* as first philosophy.

As Houston (2014) acknowledges, there is very little extant social work literature that recognises phenomenology's contribution other than Webb (2006) and Gray & Webb (2008), who claim to draw upon phenomenology in order to argue for *social work as art*, emerging from the social worker's being-in-the-world-of-the-social. In paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015) drawing from Arendt and Aristotle, I have argued that as social work uses a range of forms of knowledge, *theoria, poesis* and *praxis* [1]that there are elements of art, or rather, *fabrication*, embedded within it*.* However, I claim social work as distinctly *practice* that requires *phronesis,* in knowing how to help people achieve the good life. I realise that the distinction between art as understood doxically and my rather pedantic definition of art as *production,* could be seen as hair-splitting. However, I think it usefully allows me to fully expand on Arendt's

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[1] In Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* (2009) he described knowledge of things that do not change as *theoria*, knowledge of things made as *poesis,* and knowledge of things done as *praxis.* Arendt accepted these categorisations but re-prioritised them in *The Human Condition* (1958)

derivations from Aristotle of the active life as comprising *Labour, Work* and *Action*. Subsequent work has not really developed this theme but nor have I moved away from it. Indeed, I would argue that the bulk of my work has further sought to put theory in its place as a valid and important form of knowledge but, as I conclude here, to be used as an area for reflection rather than as a tool. It therefore follows ethics and ontology rather than precedes them and I argue for the social worker to become a theorist rather than a theoretician.

What is the practitioner left with then if we rob them of theory in situ? I have argued that the technicalization of practice would supplant Theoria with Poesis, and I have sought to problematise that as constructing people who use social work as consumers or products of social *work*. I agree with Smith (2020) who also prioritises Praxis as the most relevant form of knowledge for social work practitioners and rightly specifies the need for phronesis as the virtue that enables practically wise people to help others achieve a good life. I concur and would argue that the social work profession and social work education needs to consider how it inculcates phronesis into the work force. The difficult question is 'how do we make people wise?'

It is relatively easy to teach theory and there are textbooks full of it. It is probably easier to teach technical knowledge through provision of practice frameworks with their accompanying tools and policy-procedural manuals and I can think of a lifetime of practice populated by flowcharts. Yet if we are, as I argue in this thesis, to have to deal with unique ethical problems that we may be uniquely positioned to deal with in Scheler's *Kairos*, we are recognising that no flow chart, procedure manual or theory is likely to present the unique answer. We therefore need practitioners to be wise for themselves, to become the *Phronimos* (Aristotle, 2009). I can only propose that we develop our practitioners in something akin to ethical gymnasia within which they develop their phronesis by being regularly presented with situations requiring an ethical response. We give them the equipment of theory to exercise upon, we encourage good technique through the exploration of different ethical approaches and through use of the epoche and theorising. But most of all we reward involvement by bringing them into contact with themselves, others and the presenting issues, through active challenge and the phenomenological reduction. As Smith (2020:8)

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goes on to argue, phronesis needs to be enacted and practised "…it achieves meaning only through its testing and transformation in and through praxis…"

Through adopting Arendt, I am thus able to draw a distinction between being with people who use our services in social *action* and seeing people as the products of social *work*. Similarly, Houston (2014) describes how social work has become locked into what Weber described as 'instrumental rationality' characterised by a means-end approach to problem-solving. He argues that this approach sidelines morals and ethics with its primary concern for procedure leading to an iron-cage of bureaucracy. Social life is therefore stripped of meaning and ethicality. Arendt (1970: 38) is extremely insightful here in describing bureaucracy as '…the latest and perhaps most formidable…' form of domination as it is a system in which *Nobody* can be held accountable – there is no-one left to answer for what is being done as it is impossible to localize responsibility. She feels this is the most tyrannical of all forms of domination.

> "…perhaps the nature of every bureaucracy, is to make functionaries and mere cogs in the administrative machinery out of men (sic), and thus to dehumanise them. And one can debate long and profitably on the rule of Nobody, which is what the political form known as bureau-cracy truly is." (Arendt, 2006:289)

She further argues that bureaucracy alongside psychology and sociology, rightly or wrongly, explain away the responsibility of the doer for his deed in terms of this or that determinism. "But what is not debatable is that no judicial procedure would be possible on the basis of them, and that the administration of justice, measured by such theories, is an extremely unmodern, not to say, outmoded institution." (Arendt, 2006: 290). Here we can see how state social work occupies a *Raison d'etat* in which its reasons and those of its citizens are not subject to the same rules but are claimed as necessary. How else can the separation of children from birth family be explained ethically? In paper 2 (Ward & Smeeton, 2017) my contribution was to examine the empirical evidence for and against adoption and to develop the ethical challenge.

My work on Arendt (paper 1, Smeeton 2015) has been acknowledged by Garrett (2019:39) who welcomes 'important attempts made to forge a connection between [Arendt's] intellectual contributions and social work theory and practice." However, he then goes on to sidestep my argument to "…dwell on a much larger corpus and different facets of her work than Smeeton" and critiques Arendt more on her biography than her work. I do not have space to deal with Garrett's (2019) paper here other than to note his conclusion that Arendt's theorization is riddled with major problems and her work jars in fundamental ways with more critical forms of theorization in social work. I agree that her work should not be uncritically imported into social work but there is a very rich seam to mine and I intend in future work to return to it. Specifically, to the work she has done on the banality of evil arising from thoughtlessness and the dangers of bureaucratization I introduced above.

According to Totschnig (2019) Arendt believes that the human capacity for action is the capacity to conceive and carry out new principles, to create new practices and institutions based on new ideas. Action is plural because it takes place between people and to act is to act with or against others, to act in concert or in competition. Totschnig, (2019) argues that there are differences between the temporality of labour, work and action. Labour is circular and has neither beginning nor end for it leads back to where it came from; work is linear with a beginning and an end, the conception and the completion of the object. Action is also linear with a clear beginning, the deed by which the new endeavour is initiated yet "…it does not have a foreseeable end, for an action gives rise to further actions, it inspires coactions and provokes reactions. That is, it sets off a process that is potentially infinite" (Totschnig, 2019:192):

> "A deed among our fellow citizens, once performed, cannot be undone. It can be forgiven to be sure, but it cannot be effaced such that things are as if it had never happened." (Totschnig, 2019: 191)

This raises a question that we will deal with in the next chapter around the temporality of ethics, where I will introduce the idea of 'infinite responsibility'. As we argued in paper 1 (Ward & Smeeton, 2017), adoption has been preferred by

successive governments as the ideal(ised) permanence option. What this requires then is a decision made at a very early point in a child's life that has to be settled within a short arbitrary timeframe of 26 weeks, that is intended to last forever. If we accept Arendt's proposition that action has no foreseeable end but sets off an evanescent chain of reactions that is infinite, then we have to be open to the very real need to change plans. The idea that we can find the perfect permanent solution without knowing how this chain of meaning will develop becomes highly questionable and must be open to review on practical, emotional and moral grounds. We have an ethical responsibility to respond to developing individuals whose needs, hopes aspirations and subjectivities cannot be permanently decided by psychological pathologisations of love and belonging.

Levinas (2006:58) is highly critical of the social sciences full of apocalyptic ideas or intellectual high-society slogans which take hold as the latest craze "but are soon reduced to bargain prices and downgraded." He claims that their primary truth is methodological expressing a certain state of research in the social sciences that has a concern for rigour yet is mistrustful of individual meaning.

> "A formalism is required to tame the wild proliferation of human facts that, broached in their contents, blur the theoretician's vision, and to measure the certitude of knowledge, which is more assured of the limits of its axiomatics than of any given axioms…All respect for the 'human mystery' is thereafter denounced as ignorance or oppression." (Levinas, 2006:58).

Houston (2014) draws upon phenomenology to argue for a restoration of the 'lifeworld' in order to recentralize meaning, relationship and therapeutic growth so that social work can be practised in an ontologically intelligent and person-centred manner. He goes on to posit that "social work needs to be reminded of what lies at the heart of human ontology: the experience of Being or what the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1962) referred to as Dasein" (Houston, 2014:88) According to Knudsen (2019) Heidegger rejected traditional ethics in favour of 'originary ethics' which challenges the distinctions between ethics and ontology and rather views them as a unified form of enquiry that is prior to practical and theoretical reasoning. This form of enquiry uncovers "…the existential structures that make our engagements with each

other meaningful in the first place.' (Knudsen, 2019:337) "…Heidegger's ontology therefore proposes to understand being as between self, others and the world. If we understand ethics in a sufficiently broad way, namely as the questioning of the way in which (inter)action and choice can transform human existence, it becomes clear that these two modes of inquiry to some extent inform each other: Our views on human ontology and relationality informs our conceptions of ethics and vice versa." (Knudsen, 2019: 338) This is also the central position of this thesis, that social work cannot claim any understanding of the human condition without grappling with ontology and the ethical implications that arise from it. Levinas however, charges Heidegger as being equally dismissive of the inner world as are the social sciences and claims that Heidegger radicalizes Husserl's anti-psychologism. This, conflagration of Heidegger and the social sciences Levinas claims, has brought about an end to subjectivity.

According to Large (2015) Levinas' *Totality & Infinity* has a similar project to Heidegger's *Being & Time* in trying to dig down to discover the fundamental principle of being a self. Heidegger concludes that this is a fundamental ontology whereas Levinas concludes it is a primary ethics. Levinas in fact argues in *Totality & Infinity* that ethics determines ontology rather than the other way around (Large, 2015:9). As Large points out there are major differences in the approach to the Other as phenomenology has developed; Husserl recognized the Other as like me, while for Heidegger the Other belongs to the way in which I relate to my own being, by my deciding how I relate to them the Other belongs to my existential project and is internalized within Dasein. For Levinas, the Other is always other and external to me and in fact it is the Other who constitutes me. Levinas is critical of Heidegger's basic prejudice from within the phenomenological tradition that the Other is part of my experience, rather than apart from it. I care for the Other only because my existence matters to me and not because they call this existence into question and demand I interrogate myself.

Traditionally philosophy begins with ontology and epistemology and from there it derives an ethics and from there what arises is an agreement about what is true as justified from within those positions. Levinas, in making ethics prior to ontology and epistemology, argues that the justification should have more of an ethical flavour

than an epistemological one. It is not enough to know something without the ethical commitment to the Other within that knowledge. Heidegger argues that our understanding is completely embodied in existence rather than cognition. Levinas goes further in arguing that understanding is not only grounded in historically constituted everyday existence, but also in the relation to the Other. "It is ethics and not ontology that fundamentally grounds and anchors knowledge as an activity." (Large, 2015:40)

In Levinas' use of the Face as the primary encounter with the Other, he is not claiming the face as having any mystical hidden properties that defy description. He is however, arguing that descriptive sentences are not the only way we experience the world. The dominant model in western philosophy since Plato has been to reduce experiences to descriptive sentences and if you are unable to do that then it is hard to argue that you have had an experience at all. Levinas calls this 'objectification' which he believes reduces language to a secondary activity to seeing. It becomes like living in one large episode of "Catchphrase", trying to express a series of random clichés following regularly repeated instruction to 'say what you see.' Again, how often have I heard social work management attempting to stoke the information machine by encouraging social workers to record everything – "If it isn't on the system, it didn't happen." "Say what you saw, heard, did."

I have argued (paper, 4. Smeeton, 2018) that there is also something beyond language and vision that perhaps defies (or at least eludes) regular description, that I draw from Heidegger – *mood.* In that paper I argue that risk creates a mood of anxiety that lies like a fog over social work practice, making everything murkier, getting in the way of vision and clarity. As it lies above practice it does not feature in linguistic descriptions from practitioners who restrain their objectification to the people they are peering at through the fog. Rarely do they describe the Other as seen, partially obscured through the risk paradigm (paper 6, Smeeton, 2020). I argue throughout my work that this directionless *mood* of anxiety infects social work decision-making and becomes translated into a (mis)directed *fear* about people and the likelihood/possibility/chance/risk of harm. I argue that within this mood of anxiety the gaze in fact turns towards the social workers' own concerns and sense that they and their organisation are taking professional reputational risks. The ethical

commitment moves from an external Other towards an internal one, that sees the Other as internalized into Dasein. I care for the Other only as much as my existence matters to me. Through this use of Levinas as a reflection on my previous work I begin to see the limitations of it and as I argue above, Heidegger is only ever useful for his ontology. Once we look for the ethical commitment it is important to look prior to ontology. Levinas offers me this.

4.3. The Ethical Spine –Scheler, Heidegger & Levinas– Papers, 1,2,4,5,6

This chapter will begin with an overview of current ethical positions within social work before going on to expand on the ethical implications that I think arise from my published work. That discussion will necessarily describe the progression within phenomenology from Scheler onwards, taking in Arendt, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas and concluding with current work that arises from the tradition via Derrida.

From Biestek (1961) onwards, too often social work has attempted to draw up a set of principles or rules that seek to guide practitioners about both their attitude toward their practice but also to steer decision-making and judgment. Often these are put forward as a 'code of practice' (GSCC) or claimed as a code of ethics (BASW). Banks (2008:1238) speaks of social work ethics as a "…specialist area of professional ethics comprising the study of the norms of right action, good qualities of character and values relating to the nature of the good life that are aspired to, espoused and enacted by social workers in the context of their work." She goes on to argue that the field has expanded beyond principle-based theories of ethics but also virtue-, care- and narrative based approaches and to include descriptive as well as normative ethics.

Biestek's principles were geared towards supporting voluntary service users and as social work, in the UK at least, has moved inexorably toward state interventionism focused on complex work with people who may be using services involuntarily, the simplistic allure of principle-based ethics is tarnished. Banks (2008) describes the challenge to principle-based theories such as Kantianism and consequentialism from the revival of virtue ethics, ethics of care and pluralist, discursive post-modern or anti-theory approaches. She suggests mutual benefit from cross-fertilisation between moral, political and religious philosophy and social work ethics. So far, she posits, that social work authors have drawn from moral philosophy in piece-meal simplistic ways due to its lacking due attention by philosophers. She goes on to argue for more conscious linkages between social work ethics and politics pointing out the disconnect between the literatures on ethics and radical social work, despite the intimate connection between ethics and politics. All of which I will explore later. For now, I focus on Kant's deontological approach as I intend to conclude with a direct challenge to it.

In principle-based ethics, reasoning and decision-making are seen as a rational process of applying principles to particular cases and justifying action with reference to relevant rules and principles, where the principle is:

> "…a fundamental standard of conduct on which many other standards and judgments depend. A principle is an essential norm in a system of thought or belief, forming a basis for moral reasoning in that system" (Beauchamp, 1996:80 cited in Banks, 2012:41)

Kant proposed a deontological (rule based) theory of ethics as he thought that reason was authoritative and we can therefore rationalise an ethical position based on the principle of a respect for persons, which is his 'categorical imperative'

> "So act, as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of any other, never solely as a means but always also as an end." (Kant [1785] 1964:96 cited in Banks, 2012:43)

We must therefore treat other people as having their own choices and desires and not just as objects to meet our own ends. Kant also proposed a principle of universalizability:

> "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law". (Kant [1785] 1964:88 cited in Banks, 2012:43).

All ethics therefore is done from a sense of duty through a process of logical reasoning. We are all rational and autonomous beings and therefore have freewill. Other formal rule-based systems have emanated from Kant. Habermas, for example, developed Discourse ethics which recognises the intersubjectivity of people. This is formulated in terms of rational, universal, uncoerced consensus, therefore only those norms that all concerned agree with can claim validity. Everyone should have a fair hearing and we should remove the distorting influences of wealth and power. According to Houston (2010:95) for Habermas, ethics are a "…matter of communication, for it is in the implicit nature of our face-to-face talk rather than in detached, complex solitary thought that the question of what is to be done is answered from an ethical standpoint." The essential element of this is reasoned argument. Here we see the difficulty of combining Habermasian with Levinasian ethics in that reasoned argument must be posterior to knowledge while Levinas insists on ethics preceding knowledge. There has to be an ethical responsibility for the other before you can know them or anything about them. And as I have pointed out previously there is a deep-seated wariness to rationality throughout phenomenology. However, we can clearly see parallels in Habermas' descriptions of communicative action with Arendt's *Action*, a parallel I drew in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015). Houston's description of 'strategic action' starkly reminds me of far too many social worker/service user interactions than is comfortable. Treating others in a purely instrumental way as objects like this in Habermas' 'strategic action' equates to my description of social work as poesis (Smeeton, 2015). Houston (2010) points out his own earlier work to align Habermas with Honneth in order to overcome discourse ethics' fatal flaw: a lack of emotional content. While I see many strong arguments for adopting Habermas' system into formal social work fora, I fear there are limitations if the emotional content is indeed neglected.

Utilitarian ethics rears its head constantly within social work. Arising from Bentham (1748-1832) and Mill (1806-1873) it takes the principle that the right action is that which produces the greatest balance of good over evil or maximum benefit for the most people. This is often referred to as consequentialism (Smith, 2018). The "What Works for Children's Social Care?" (24.11.20) agenda and the McDonaldisation (Ritzer, 2010) of social work are driving this ethic forward as local authorities attempt to adopt the most efficacious set of techniques and tools for their workforce, aiming to find the approach that works most of the time for most of the families. There are a number of problems raised by this that I will explore in further work based on what the calculation of 'working' and 'whose benefit' is in the "What works?" world. They seem to be focusing on a gross measure where working is equated with a reduction in the number of children coming into care. That is easily measurable but what is not are more complex pertinent questions about whether the children coming into care are the ones who need to be in care and whether children who ought to be in care might not be. This calculation also bypasses important information about the quality of the relationships that children in care are able to sustain with their birth family and how families experience social work. Are they left damaged or sustained by using services? Utilitarian ethical frameworks remain highly problematic and contestable in child protection social work in the UK, but few people seem to be contesting them. I believe this is the bind that we find ourselves in when we adopt a methodology and epistemology without interrogating the ontological and ethical assumptions.

All the above see humans as individuals with freedom. Radical and emancipatory perspectives tend to see freedom as a myth and see humans as essentially social. Marx for example saw morality as a bourgeois illusion. Radical social work is committed to *praxis* defined as committed action – raising the consciousness of those they work with. Feminist and anti-racist approaches critique Marxian understanding of social work as dominated by a focus on class and ignoring other structural injustices. There is very little emphasis on ethical principles in this body of work but it has a political stance with a commitment to social change. Values such as equality, collectivism, community and social justice feature heavily and the equal distribution of resources according to need is emphasised. All of this is very much articulated by principle-based ethics with a strong teleological emphasis aiming

towards a better future. The danger here is that the presenting Other who stands before you becomes subsumed into one's own political commitment toward an idealised future society. Individuals become totalised by the structural inequalities used to describe them which easily renders the social worker and the service user righteously angry but powerless against macro structural barriers.

All the above principle based ethical frameworks ignore important aspects of the moral life and moral judgments, including the character, motives and emotions of the moral agent, the contexts in which judgments are made and the relationships and commitments people have to each other. They have a tendency to place the stress on the action rather than the person undertaking the action and assume through universal application, that humanity is singular rather than plural. They perpetuate the myth that ethical decision-making can be impartial and by adhering to a set of principles or rules they make morality both rational and thoughtless at one and the same time. Heidegger (1993) claimed that "Rationality is the most stiff-necked adversary to thought." We can easily see how this becomes problematic when practitioners can apply a set of handed down rules that they don't necessarily need to agree with or indeed to think about. We steer close to Arendt's description of the banality of evil arising from thoughtlessness.

Totschnig (2019) expands on Arendt's claim that political action should be motivated and guided by principles like justice, equality or honour, rather than by goals, as they are general ideas that allow for diverse implementations and can therefore provide guidance in the face of unpredictability. "Such principled action does not have a fixed goal, it is open-ended, because its goal will vary with the changing circumstances and thus always be provisional. What remains fixed, what defines the process, is the principle that guides it." (Totschnig, 2019:190) He develops this argument by positing that if goals are what drive endeavour, actors tend to subordinate other considerations to that goal which they will use to justify means in order to achieve the goal. The end justifies the means. If rather they are guided by principle, the outcome becomes less of a concern and the driver is to manifest and advance the principle. They will tend therefore to be more open to differing viewpoints and approaches of others. Arendt's use of 'principle' here is more akin to Aristotle's use of virtue.

Virtue ethics are rooted in the Aristotelian tradition but also within many religious traditions including Buddhist, Confucian, African and medieval Christianity (Banks, 2012). The focus is on the character or dispositions of moral agents rather than obligations, duties or principles. So, the basic judgments in ethics are judgments of character. According to Hursthouse, (1997:229 cited in Banks, 2012:72) an action is right if it is what a virtuous agent would do in the circumstances. A 'virtue' in this instance is "a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well'. An important question therefore is what counts as living well or flourishing? Can these virtues be universal or are they socio-historically dependent? Houston (2003) rightly points out the tautology in this position that in order to establish virtue we must refer to a virtuous person without knowing by what stick we measure that person's virtuosity. However, typically we talk about virtues such as: courage, integrity, honesty, truthfulness, loyalty, wisdom, kindness. These arise not because of an abstract rule, but because the person decides this is the kind of person they want to be, and also they arise in relation to others – it is important to be kind to the people I work with because they are important to me rather than an abstract rule that tells me to promote the wellbeing of others. MacIntyre (1985:191 cited in Banks, 2012:72) argues that virtues are relative to culture and role. They are qualities 'the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.' What then should be the virtues of social workers? Banks & Gallagher (2009) survey the literature and conclude they can be summed up by: professional wisdom, courage, respectfulness, care, trustworthiness, justice and professional integrity.

Drawn from feminist approaches the Ethics of Care features frequently in social work (Gilligan, 1982). The main focus is care as a relationship and/or as a practice. The relationship element is important as it is about transferring care from a feeling to a practice. I can care passionately about people from afar, but they may not feel cared about unless I enact that through a connection with the person. (see paper 1, Smeeton, 2015) Gilligan (1982 cited in Banks, 2012) identified two moral voices: an 'ethic of care' and an 'ethic of justice' (principle-based approaches to ethics). Gilligan argues that the ethic of justice is a male-oriented system of morality which does not take account of approaches to ethics that tend to be adopted by women. The danger

here is that this becomes an essentialist argument – women are 'merely' carers at their essence and men are not. As a man I reject the totalising aspect of this on behalf of both genders.

Tronto (1993, cited in Banks 2012) develops a political theory of care where care is valued as a political ideal in the context of democratic institutions. She (Tronto, 1993:103 cited in Featherstone, 2010:76) further defines care as including, "…everything we do to maintain, continue and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible." She goes on to contrast it with what care is not, such as the pursuit of pleasure, creative activity, production and destruction. What is definitive about care seems to be the perspective of taking the other's needs as the starting point for what must be done. This is startlingly similar to Arendt's description of Labour within her distinctions between Labour, Work and Action that I describe in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015) and shows how easy it is to diminish the importance of ethical work into a maintenance role – one of Caretaker in both senses. Featherstone (2010:84) seems to concur with Tronto in doubting whether protection as an activity can embody the ethic of care which, as she highlights, has further limitations in asking questions such as how do social workers in complex situations develop and maintain the capacity to care?

In common with the ethics of care and virtue ethics the Levinasian ethics of proximity shares a dissatisfaction with the abstraction from context required by principle-based ethical theories. Smith (2018:32) recognises the problem of social distance,

> "…whereby a lack of proximity diminishes the sense of moral responsibility we have towards people or situations. Social Distance can also be created by bureaucratic systems that get in the way of interpersonal contact. The further one is removed from another human being, either geographically or along a bureaucratic chain, the easier it becomes to take decisions that fall back on procedural rather than relational responses."

The most extreme example of this is described by Arendt (1963) in her analysis of Eichmann - a *Report on the Banality of Evil*.

Ethics arise from the phenomenological/existential tradition from an experiential basis, not from abstract universalising theory and the human dyad is the basic seat of concern and responsibility. So, the cognitive and emotional abilities needed to adopt a moral view are fostered in a setting of proximity with close interaction with irreplaceable others, which amplifies the importance of good organisational design that is taken up by the excellent work of others (e.g. Featherstone et al, 2014; Featherstone et al, 2018; Wastell & White, 2014) In the following chapter I will describe and explicate Levinasian ethics within the wider phenomenological tradition.

Towards a phenomenological ethics for social work

> "After all, ethics is a damned bloody affair, and if it cannot give me directions on how I ought to be and to live now in this social and historical context – well, what meaning does it have then?" (Scheler, cited in Deeken, 1974:113)

Scheler is often overlooked in current phenomenology but he brings some interesting thought to the discussion by introducing the temporal dimension of ethics (which I will argue is also overlooked in social work) but also as preceding and informing both Heidegger and Levinas whose work has tended to overshadow his own. Scheler developed the idea that there needs to be a synthesis between supratemporal, universal values with temporal, historical ones that emerge from particular concrete situations. This requires the individual to have a composite view of the totality of life but also a unique ear for the 'demand of the hour', which Scheler calls 'Kairos'. He argues that rationalist systems of ethics deny the variety and multiplicity of historically changing moral values and that it is a basic error to maintain that this multitude can ever be grasped by one individual, one people, one nation or one period of history (Deeken, 1974:115). Scheler writes:

> "It is quite possible that one individual person alone possesses full evidence of a moral demand which points to this individual alone and which holds validity solely for this unique case." (cited in Deeken, 1974:117)

These are individual moral imperatives that do not invalidate norms but go beyond the realm of universally valid morality. Here Scheler is calling out Kant's argument for universal validity as a criterion for the justification of moral imperatives. While Heidegger was strongly influenced by Scheler he never himself developed a systematic treatise on ethics and seems according to Deeken (1974) to have subsumed ethics into his ontology in that if one has a commitment to Being this is an ethical commitment. However, given his political conclusions and membership of the Nazi party, he is hardly the first author one turns to for any kind of ethical insight. In paper 4 (Smeeton, 2018) I distance myself from Heidegger's political position while still seeking to use specific insights from his ontology. This could be viewed as trying to have my cake and eat it, but I think reflects my rejection of a totalising universal metanarrative. Bourdieu (1996) certainly sees this position as highly questionable and claims Heidegger's political ontology is in itself problematic, which I acknowledge in paper 4 (Smeeton, 2018).

Levinas, as a Jew who had himself suffered internment, saw much in Heidegger's ontology but rejected his claim that …'the truth of Being as the originating element of man as an ek-sistent (sic) being is in itself the original Ethics.' (Heidegger, 1949 cited in Deeken, 1974:123). Levinas wrote about his own research on death and the debt it owed to Heidegger "It distinguishes itself from Heidegger's thought, and it does so in spite of the debt that every contemporary thinker owes to Heidegger – a debt that one often regrets." (cited in Derrida, 1997:12)

It is Levinas' positioning of ethics *before* ontology and therefore *first philosophy* that I am examining here. I offer the argument that political commitments and ethical commitments in social work, and in life, often grate against each another and it is the ethical work arising from the friction that leads us towards Scheler's Kairos, particular unique moral demands that lie before us in the demand of the hour. One has to respond to one's right to be, not because of some abstract law but because of one's fear for the other. Levinas refers to 'guiltless responsibility – 'as if I were devoted to the other man before I was devoted to myself. Vetlesen (1997:10 cited in Banks 2012:83) says 'morality is not an option but a predicament, part and parcel of human existence. The Other commits me to being for him by his sheer co-existence.'

Smith (2018) in drawing up a proposal for a uniquely Scottish ethics recognises the work of Hutcheson and Hume in recognising benevolence as a human quality independent of will based not on reason or self-interest but something more human. Smith's (2018:31) description of Hume's position, "…that morality is not derived from reason but from feelings of approval and disapproval felt by spectators who contemplate and evaluate a character trait or action" comes remarkably close to Levinas' commitment to the other. Levinas however would stress the alterity of the other and would argue that basing a morality on what others think about you is an attempt to bring the focus back to your own self. 'I behave well not because it is the right thing to do but because I need the affirmation of others' instrumentalises the Other for the Self's purpose.

> "Levinas's ethics of responsibility are not about making moral life easier {but}…making it a bit more moral (Bauman, 1993:15 cited in Tascón, 2010:94)

Tascón (2010) recognises that many historical and current ethical frameworks are challenged by ambivalence and uncertainty arising from the post-modern turn. New discussions arising from ethics forged by compassion are beyond rule-bound procedural and institutionalised decision-making. She argues that Levinasian ethics is already emerging in social work theory, but often through other influential theorists, such as Bauman, Burke, Derrida, Blanchot, Baudrillard, Irigaray and Lyotard, but is seldom attributed to Levinas himself (p.91).

> "Social work has the potential to enact Levinas' welcome of the stranger in a gesture devoid of pity, devoid of self-serving interest and devoid of narcissism. Social work's central tenet of respect and empathy for the Other carries this implicitly." (Tascón, 2010:92)

According to Tascón (2010:86) what Levinas presents is an ethics of responsibility that do not rely on cultural or group homogeneity but allows a response of compassion towards others across difference in a stance of human to human. She argues that this instructs a human response to human condition that transcends roles and breaks down the false professional-lay person divide. In their critique of

cultural competence, Ben-Ari & Strier (2010:2156) similarly argue for a comprehensive understanding of relations between 'Self' and 'Other' as an "…unavoidable point of departure." They then go on to promote Levinas' view of alterity as an alternative and innovative prism to explore this through. In most models of cultural competence, the relationship between 'Self' and 'Other' is under-theorised but there is an underlying assumption across them that the 'Other' is knowable and in fact that this knowledge is a pre-requisite for being culturally competent. Therefore, practitioners can be trained to be culturally competent, all they need is the pre-requisite knowledge about the culture(s) from which their client comes. As we have seen above, Levinas would balk at the idea that knowledge about someone would precede an ethical commitment toward them.

In traditional western philosophy, knowledge precedes ethics which is thought of as derivative of that knowledge. Smith's (2018:32) assertion that "Ethical principles do not come out of nowhere but reflect and are derived from bigger ideas of how we know and understand the world" displays how he understands epistemology as prior to ethics. The assumption, as in cultural competence is that we need to have certain knowledge in order to live ethically. Ethics therefore becomes a question of knowledge. For Levinas, ethics precedes knowledge. The other is not knowable and cannot be made an object of the self and is always external to the self. Ben-Ari & Strier (2010) argue from Levinas that ethics becomes the condition for knowledge and therefore infinitely open to difference and this susceptibility to difference defines how we relate to each other. This negates any rationale that knowledge about others will point the way to ethical action. Knowledge itself is therefore an ethical question rather than a tool that enables competence. Ben-Ari & Strier (2010) go on to argue that trying to have knowledge of the other is an attempt to totalize them and turn them into something that satisfies our own needs. We should therefore, in this interpretation of Levinas, replace knowledge of the other with responsibility to the other.

> "We do not have to know in order to serve the 'Other' or to face up to his or her demands, for knowledge does not necessarily lead to the right actions, or even to a more ethical action…under certain conditions it can even be harmful." (Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010:2164)

Garrett (2017) suggests that replacing knowledge with responsibility would not stand up in court. I think from my own reading of Levinas and Ben-Ari & Strier's paper that there is no setting aside of knowledge, just putting it in its place as secondary to ethics rather than prior. Ben-Ari & Strier conclude that "…one must accept that learning from the 'Other' is an infinite desire." What is resisted is the temptation to totalize their experience through claiming prior knowledge about whichever culture they may come from and what that means to them individually. This approach is essentially phenomenological – bracket your prior assumptions and understandings, set them to one side and listen to what this person is telling you about their experience. Glimpse into their lifeworld but recognize that you are only being afforded a glimpse and you cannot ever know the totality of it. Responsibility, according to Tascón (2010), goes to the very heart of ethics as a deeply fundamental aspect of the human condition. It is not ever a technical enterprise within which we can draft clear programmes of behaviour detached from their humanity. Nor is it rule-bound.

Levinas' description of ethics as 'first philosophy' is foundational. It arises from a human subject immersed in ethical responsibility by being born into a world of Others (Tascón, 2010). Such an ethics cannot be deontological as it is prior to ontology and epistemology and therefore rationality. It is rather an inescapable primary commitment to the Other. This responsibility comes before theoretical rules or norms of ethical conduct. The possibility for the categorical imperative then is negated as ethics comes before knowledge and understanding.

Tascón (2010) therefore questions the possibility of applying an ethics of responsibility to social work which is in practice, rule-bound within organisational contexts saturated with highly prescribed activities. How does the social worker promote an ethics of welcome, of the stranger, of hospitality that does not consume or subsume the Other within their own frames of reference? I argue that whatever the organisational context or statutory requirements of social work, the individual practitioner walks into other people's lives with their own commitment to the Other. Whatever law, policy or process, whichever tool is currently being promoted, it is the individual social worker whose hand extends across that tool. Indeed as I have

argued in paper 5 (Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019) the hand and the tool form an alliance and it is in the dexterity and feel they have for the responsiveness of the other in using that tool, that we might equate to the ethics of responsibility. I go on to argue that the social worker is not a passive objective machine employing the tools of the state but is an embodied practitioner who makes sense of both the service user's meanings and their own perceptions. I drew upon Merleau-Ponty's use of 'perception' here as relating to our experience of the world pre-theoretically ie. before knowledge. If this is where perception sits then it should sit alongside an ethical commitment to the other. It has a responsibility to the other.

Tascón (2010: 93) usefully distances the welcoming gesture from 'pity' by arguing from Levinas that "Pity holds the self in her or his self-interested core, venturing only so far towards the other as is safe for the self, withdrawing swiftly behind borders that protect the self from any perceived threat of the other". Levinas' ethics is one of proximity – we need to get close in order to understand the other from their own perspective, from the meanings and understandings they bring. Falling back on pity is a distancing act that separates self from other.

> "Responding entirely from a role can dehumanise, directing action that only goes so far, allowing us only so much scope before the boundedness of the role limits us." (Tascón, 2010:93)

Banks (2012:84) comments that these appeals to Levinas are less about presenting an alternative theory of ethics for social work and more '…a challenge to rethink the nature of social work and the inevitable distance that professionalism and managerialism brings to the relationship between social workers and service users."

In Rossiter's (2011:981) excellent paper on the challenge of Levinas to social work ethics, she advocates 'unsettled' social work practice as a way to move beyond the "…separated discursive positions of critical and normative social work". From Levinas' *Totality & Infinity* (1969) she argues for a social work as a practice of ethics *prior to* professional status and knowledge claims. This echoes my conception of social work as applied phenomenology that transcends understandings of humans as the products of their psychological and sociological factors as argued in paper 5

(Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019). She argues that knowledge claims pose a threat to ethics and cites Levinas as "…explicating the fundamental violence that inheres in knowledge itself (Rossiter, 2011: 982). Professional exterior claims to 'know' a person do violence to that person's own understanding of, and meaning made, of their lifeworld by totalizing their experience in generalities. These totalities arise from theories that seek a total explanation of people's experience such as psychoanalytic theory that aims to understand the psychic realm or systems theories that seek to predict interactional patterns. Use of theory in this way allows us to feel confidence in our professional status as knowing or understanding another person. This is social work as the technical application of theory that constructs the practitioner as theoretician. Rossiter posits that when we conceptualise people through our knowledge, assumptions and beliefs (totality) we turn them into extensions of the conceptions we are using. Projecting onto them understandings that are ours and not their own ignores the plurality of experience and leaves little space to consider their singularity. We reduce each to all and understand them as the same.

Rossiter (2011:983) draws upon Levinas' conception of Infinity as the "inexhaustible, irreducible singularity of people: it is what is outside the Same." All representations of persons are inadequate and there are always elements of others' lives that are beyond our comprehension and understanding. Whatever conceptualisations or theory I choose to support my practice is always therefore lacking the ability to make the other 'my conceptual captive' (Rossiter, 2011:983). Individuals are utterly unique and I argue that we therefore need practitioners who function as theorists – able to formulate a new conceptual understanding of each person they encounter. "…Levinas wants us to greet the other; with a conviction that the other person can never be fully known through our representation of him." (Rossiter, 2011:983) This becomes, Rossiter argues, the heart of ethics, where a belief that we can reduce the singularity of people to being 'understood' is a violation. Rossiter argues that this impossibility of representation serves as her conception of unsettled social work practice. But as she (2011:984) points out, "The idea of understanding and conceptualizing the Other is the foundation of the profession." How do we respond to the ethical challenge that Levinas poses if these conceptualisations are forms of ethical captivity?

I pose a fundamental question here: do we need to be able to understand and conceptualise the other in order to help them through social work practice? To do so seems to me that we are attempting to 'fix' them to meaning, a type or a diagnosis in order to seek the right understanding, approach or cure. The assumption is that what they currently are is flawed and our intervention is seeking to help them overcome their inadequacies. There is also an assumption that they are unable to know themselves adequately and that our exteriority to their lifeworld is a privileged position from which we can help. In treating them as extensions to our own understandings, categorisations and theories seems at one and the same time an extremely arrogant position that ignores the inherent flaws in our own personal and professional knowledge, but also in Levinasian terms, *murders* their uniqueness (Perpich, 2008 cited in Rossiter, 2011). They become mere extensions of our knowing which inevitably objectifies them. Rossiter concurs with Gottlieb (1994:222) that knowledge cannot therefore be the basis of ethics if ethics is a concern for others '…untouched by our own ways of seeing, our needs, desires or attempts to control.' Rossiter points out that this is a radical departure from descriptions of professional ethics, which arise from the internal thinking of the worker and delivered to the client. She argues from Levinas that ethics starts with the Other.

So, where does this leave professionalism and professional knowledge? Rossiter argues that representation becomes inevitable when a third party enters the dynamic as there is a need to represent one to the other and therefore reducing the first person's singularity to abstract conceptions in order to represent them and avoid conflicting claims to justice. Social Workers judge and a failure to do this from an acknowledged theoretical conceptualisation also runs the risk of injustice, however ethically reflexive we might be. Rossiter (2011:989) proposes a commitment to "living on the razor's edge of the violence of representation and the necessity for justice and service," which she coins 'unsettled social work practice'. Within this formulation she is attempting to bridge the chasm between critical social work and an ethical commitment to the individual, which tries to know the individual through knowing her as a victim of injustice or as oppressed. As she herself acknowledges, this falls short of Levinasian principles which move us beyond critical social work locked into theories of justice and oppression towards ethics itself. A commitment to the singular individual. I fail to see why she attempts to reconcile the two into one form of social

work practice. Why seek a totalizing practice that maintains an ethical commitment to the individual and a political challenge to oppression and injustice. Both are possible and I see no reason why social work cannot recognise and address structural inequalities within society while simultaneously respecting the singular experiences of the person before them without assuming some theory of causation that one necessarily produces the other or that a piece of practice has to do both things at the same time. Arendt becomes useful here. She doesn't reject *theoria* or *poesis* outright but privileges *praxis* over those other forms of knowledge. The social worker needs to draw upon them all. As I argue in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015), social workers need some poetic knowledge to negotiate the technicalisation of process, procedure and technique; they also need theoretical knowledge, not as a tool but as a space for reflection; but most importantly they need practical knowledge of how to engage with, listen to and form a *natality* of understanding of the person before them. The human condition is plural and each has their own particular experience.

Rossiter recognises how social work technique deforms ethical sociality by the imposition of instrumentalized professional relationships. Recently 'Signs of Safety' (Turnell & Edwards, 1997) has been adopted in many local authorities as a way to technicalise practice with the families who fall under its gaze. And while it has a clear commitment to recognizing strengths as well as dangers, it assumes the same theoretical knowledge of individuals that they will, by nature, comply and conform to strengths-based practice. It has become an orthodoxy and has displaced practice alternatives. If it does not work for your family, then it is your family's failure rather than a failure of approach. A practice that saw the uniqueness of each individual within unique families and sought to understand the meanings they attribute would seek to build a practice approach to address those inadequate, incomplete, but ethically defensible understandings. Currently practice has found a collection of techniques that are imposed on individuals and their families based on prior assumed knowledge about what should work for all. Smith's (2018) description of Macmurray's concern about overly technical forms of knowledge being detrimental to values is worthy of future exploration as it is echoed in my description of the prevalence of *poesis* in social work practice (paper 1, Smeeton, 2015) and its impact upon the constructions of people who use services as products of social *work*.

Rossiter is trying to bridge the chasm between critical social work and an ethical commitment to the individual before knowledge, which she has termed unsettled social work practice. She claims that:

> "It is an insistence that an orientation to singularity requires the distance that allows us to suspend assumptions, place what we think we know at risk and leave ourselves open to revelation from the Other: in other words, to place ethics before practice."(Rossiter, 2011:991)

She is advocating a common phenomenological technique of the *epoché*, which, as I point out in paper 5 (Smeeton & O'Connor, 2019), requires one to suspend prior assumptions and to privilege the accounts given by the people we are working with over our own.

I welcome Rossiter's (2011) orientation towards Levinasian ethics which requires a humbler approach to social work knowledge and a fallible version of ourselves as social workers. However, I am wary of her attempt to reconcile this commitment to ethics prior to knowledge with critical social work which cannot exist without a reliance on a commitment to knowledge prior to ethics.

Garrett (2017) is an unlikely ally on this point but his general treatment of Levinas is limited, reading in meanings that do not come directly from his work but apply a retrospective morality to his philosophy of Self & Other. Garrett cites De Beauvoir in 1949 as claiming Levinas' work on alterity amounts to 'an assertion of male privilege'. This critique precedes most of Levinas' published work and completely ignores a substantial body of work completed by feminist philosophers in the last 70 years, which sees many parallels between De Beauvoir's and Levinas' work on alterity. e.g. Giovanini, (2019:39) who argues that "Beauvoir's reading of Levinas on 'the other' is not a charitable one, and the ethical ambivalence in Levinas' notion of alterity can motivate the praxis Beauvoir seeks for undoing social forms of oppression".

Garrett draws upon Eagleton (2009:241, cited in Garrett, 2016:1462) to describe Levinas' ethics as unable to '…conjure a politics from it, beyond the most banal of liberal pluralism' and as being '…sociologically unconvincing…' Garrett contrasts

Levinas' '…weightless evocation of social relations…' with Bourdieu's overarching sociological theoretical framework. Garrett claims that '…a harsh critic might conclude that the philosopher's perspective can, in fact appear banally platitudinous' (2016: 1462). That Levinas has little to say about the functioning of states, economic exploitation and inequality is a lack in Garrett's eyes, and he views Levinas as too easily equating Marxism with Stalinism and totalitarianism. Again, it seems the main critique Garrett presents here is a lack of the elements Garrett feels should be there but which Levinas has never attempted. Garrett seems to feel that in order for any theorist to be useful to social work there has to be a totalizing theory that is universally applicable to all areas of life including politics, sociology and indeed social work itself. Levinas simply doesn't attempt to do this. However, his focus on the proto-ethical position on how to deal with the one person before you, the Other to yourself, without at one and the same time having to deal with the macro issues has value within itself.

I argue that Levinas' ethics can, and should, stand within, and outside of, any other political, sociological or spiritual understanding. In fact, I further contend that this is desirable when state social work is, as currently configured within the UK, focused upon individuals and families rather than at communities. I can maintain this ethical commitment to the other while simultaneously occupying any political identity, sociological or psychological understanding I choose. Indeed, the Levinasian commitment to the priority of the Other over Self, requires me to not subsume the Other into my positionality to the world, but to respect and work within their own understandings. Thinking of Levinas' ethics as prior to ontological, epistemological, methodological, political or sociological knowledge leaves me with the provisional imperative to act in the best way I can while always being open to other understandings. Garrett's failure to see Levinas' ethics as prior to knowledge explains his inability to recognize the possibilities that open up.

I find little to disagree with in much of Garrett's analysis about the role of the state in the lives of service users, especially in the court arena. Politically and sociologically, I can jump fully on board his indignant bandwagon, but the critique that Levinas under-theorizes the state is concomitant to arguing that he under-theorizes pineapples. He sets out to do neither. Garrett's further dismissal of Ben-Ari and

Strier's (2010) work as being likely to puzzle courts who need comprehension in the form of a social work assessment is misunderstood. They do not propose going before a court and arguing that they are unable to make a recommendation because they believe that the 'relationship between myself and Other is infinitely beyond my comprehension' (Garrett, 2017: 1465). Rather this is a stark warning to practitioners to be humble in their claims to certainty and to be alive to other ways of understanding. It does not preclude them from having a view and a recommendation, but rather to not adopt the arrogant position of expert that completely negates the meaning and understanding of the birth parents and the child, too frequently seen in the UK family court (Smeeton & Boxall, 2011).

Garrett concludes that Levinas does not present a sense of the Other as a vibrant, resisting figure and believes that his ethics are '…entirely attuned to the era of food banks, and complicit with neo-liberal welfare entrenchment.' (2017: 1466). I can see how he has reached this conclusion but am sad that he has, at it is by completely bypassing Levinas' project itself and by constructing it as an alternative to political action, which it is not. Levinas proposes a responsibility to the other that outweighs any responsibility to the self which, for me at least, is a call to action in the Arendtian sense as I define in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015) rather than neo-liberal entrenchment. Social work theory has sunk into an orthodoxy of thought that is self-righteously anti-oppressive rooted in criticality and claims to empower, while presiding over a steady decline of practice into neo-liberal technicalised process.

> "Everyone will readily agree that it is of the highest importance to know whether we are not duped by morality." (Levinas, T&I: p21, cited in Large, 2015:17)

Levinas argues that what we commonly think of as morality is in terms of rules or laws and therefore deontological. I concur with Smith (2018) in recognising that when practice becomes reduced to codes there is an assumption that even a superficial adherence to such rules can lead to unjustified claims to ethical practice. Levinas believes therefore that we are duped by such morality because when we examine our moral motivations they are governed by self-interest rather than by justice. So many times, I hear social workers using the language of morality, often

wrapped up as anti-oppressive practice, while their actions are those of domination and power. Anti-oppressive practice's deontological roots are evident – 'thou shalt not oppress others' is a clear categorical imperative to counter structural oppression that social workers use to dupe themselves into a radical mindset, while simultaneously exerting the full power of the state. I share many of the political aspirations of critical theory and feel very at home with radical analyses of policy and process. However, I do not feel this has actually helped us to move our daily engagements with the people who use our services back towards kindness, care and concern and we consistently bring more and more children into care while denigrating the understandings and meanings that they themselves bring to their situations.

Social workers can and should engage politically in order to lobby and change the structural barriers that undoubtedly exist in society, but *social work* remains focused on individuals and their families and carers who deserve a prioritization of their needs and concerns over our own. I believe phenomenology assumes an attitude and orientation that prioritises their life-worlds over our professional orthodoxy. I feel my published work has sought to explore these spaces and I have attempted here to tie this work into a coherent ethics based on Levinas' position that the ethical commitment to the other should lie *before* knowledge and not, as Garrett might suggest, as an alternative to knowledge. That enables us to adopt the provisional imperative that allows modesty, transgressivity, irony and imagination. It also confers on us an infinite responsibility to the other that extends past any social work 'intervention' but recognizes the evanescent chain of meaning that we set in motion when we take action with people and that continues when we withdraw. It is by addressing this extension of Levinasian ethics through Woermann & Cilliers (2012) that I extend the discussion into a call for provisional imperatives that takes us a significant step away from Kant and forms of social work ethics and values that are locked up within the categorical imperative.

Towards the provisional imperative

Having acknowledged above Derrida's "…light and innocent debt" to Levinas, which he expands through his tribute "Adieu to Emmanuel Levinas" (1997:12) it is tempting

to see Derrida as the pre-eminent phenomenologist following Levinas' death. However, other movements have a stronger claim on Derrida that I do not have space here to contend. Yet Derrida in his turn has inspired others and I am particularly drawn to Woermann & Cilliers (2012) whose work "The ethics of complexity and the complexity of ethics" introduces an obvious counter to Kant's categorical imperative in proposing the *provisional imperative.* Sadly, while they draw heavily upon Derrida, they do not acknowledge this as an extension of Levinasian ethics per se. However, it is useful to my argument towards a new social work ethics and is a logical progression from the arguments I have so far hinted at in my published works.

Woermann & Cilliers (2012) argue that in complexity, ethics should be understood as something that both constitutes our knowledge and ourselves, rather than a normative system that dictates right action. In practice this amounts to a recognition about and engagement with, the limits of knowledge. They further argue that complexity thinking necessarily involves ethics but cannot provide any content to the ethics since the sense of right and wrong, good and bad cannot be justified on a priori grounds. They are clearly here drawing down (via Derrida) Levinas' placing of ethics before knowledge, what has been described by others as a proto-ethics but which they describe as a meta-ethical position.

> "Since all knowledge is contingent, it is also subject to revision, and therefore irreducibly provisional. Following Kantian logic, we can now capture the gist of the argument in the following imperative: 'When acting always remain cognisant of other ways of acting'. Our meta-ethical position thus constitutes a provisional imperative" (Woermann & Cilliers, 2012: 451)

While the Kantian categorical imperative indicates the rules for action, the provisional imperative focuses on the *attitude* when choosing rules for action. Remaining open to other ways of being allows us to be more likely to practise self-critical rationality, to respect diversity, be willing to revise and to guard against naturalising ways of thinking.

Without citing Levinas they seem to arrive at his same conclusion when they substitute the term *philosophy* with *ethics* "…since what lies at the heart of the

provisional imperative is the belief that ethics is indeed the other way; or more poignantly, the way which is still to come." (Woermann & Cilliers, 2012: 453) They posit an argument for four mechanisms that reinforce and promote the critical attitude:

> *Provisionality* relates to the uncertain and therefore provisional nature of knowledge and the prior ethical commitment as discussed above. Meaning is always contingent and open to perpetual reinterpretation which draws attention to both the spatial and temporal dimensions of meaning and therefore ethics. I will take up the importance of the temporal dimension below as it relates strongly to my work on adoption and the ethics of permanence planning (paper 2, Ward & Smeeton, 2017)

> *Transgressivity* becomes important for Woermann & Cilliers as they propose a violation of accepted or imposed boundaries. They argue this is both an ethical and a political position drawing again upon Derrida's (2002:29) *aporia* of politics and ethics. "Transgressivity demands absolute engagement with both ethics and politics, since both are concerned with the here and now and require a thoughtful and urgent answer to the question 'What should I do?' (Derrida, 2002:25 cited in Woermann & Cilliers, 2012: 454)

As I argue above, there is no need to try to wrap ethics and politics up in a universalising totality but recognising the conflicts and overlaps between them is space for the ethical work that is needed. However, the ethical commitment to the Other, and in terms of my social work practice, the person before me who is using my service, always remains external to me and is prior to my political position. If I bring them into my politics then I am simply falling into the trap that Heidegger made for himself by internalising the other into Dasein and making it all about me!

> *Irony* supports transgressivity. Its value is that it draws attention to the supplementary complications that govern rules and point to the impossibility of concluding any general theory that rules give rise to. It therefore affirms the necessity of improvising when faced with binary logic. Woermann & Cilliers, (2012:456) state:

"There can be no *a priori* basis from which to argue for the merits of one life strategy over another. However, it is important to assume responsibility for, and bear the consequences of our decisions. This is only possible if we are aware of the nature and status of our strategies, which Morin (208:96) refers to as 'the art of working with uncertainty."

They go onto argue that irony needs modesty and a self-deprecating humour, not taking one's own ideas too seriously and being open and tolerant to challenge. For "Irony is a critical task, without which we potentially open the door to human evil" (Woermann & Cilliers, 2012:457)

Imagination is the final mechanism as it constitutes the ability to generate variety and options and to break out of one's closed or limited hermeneutic circles. They argue that the provisional imperative is impossible with imagination as we are commanded to think of and create other ways of being.

Toward infinite responsibility

Within complexity and adoption of the provisional imperative we must recognise too that identities are not static nor *a priori* but constituted in a complex network, both a temporal process of becoming, and as a point in a nexus of relationships. In paper 2 (Ward & Smeeton, 2017) we explore the ethical implications of adoption as a permanence option and try to explore its complexity in balancing the needs and rights of children, adopters and birth parents and the iatrogenic effect (Broadhurst & Mason, 2013) caused by the act of adoption within a contested legal and policy battle between successive governments and the courts. The argument for adoption is put that early adoption of small children can enable them to settle their identities through the formation of strong attachment to the adopters. Within that paper we posit an argument that the evidence is less strong than often claimed and the ethical commitments to all undermine its justification. The transgressivity of this position was subsequently replicated by BASW's adoption review (Featherstone, Gupta, & Mills 2018), but what we also did was to suggest that other solutions needed exploring that kept open possibilities for change, such as long-term fostering. If we accept that

knowledge about people is always provisional and contingent, how can a permanent solution meet the needs of 'becoming' people? As soon as rationality fixes something it becomes beyond ethical consideration. Should we really make any plans for permanence if we believe that people have infinite possibilities before them? And if there are infinite possibilities then there is an infinite responsibility towards the people we have chosen to bring within our remit.

Recently I was contacted by a 32-year-old man who I had worked with when he was 5 years old supporting his move into an adoptive placement from a precarious foster placement. The work involved occupying his days throughout the summer holidays to ensure the foster placement did not break down, preparing him for his move into adoption and then supporting his new school placement to support the early months of his adoptive placement. He eventually told me very clearly that he did not want me to carry on working with him. I rationalized that through attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969), congratulated myself on successfully transferring his attachment from the foster care to myself and on to the adopters and so withdrew. The adoption persisted successfully. However, at 32 he was contacting me to say that he had continued to miss me throughout his childhood and felt guilty for telling me to stop coming to see him. He needed to apologise to me. I spent a while reflecting on professional boundaries before eventually agreeing to meet with him. He apologised and accepted my saying that he had never needed to and I hadn't been upset by him doing so. He then got out the lifestory book I had completed with him and had completely forgotten about. For me this was 4 months of intensive work that I remember dimly but fondly and had receded into the 27 intervening years. For him the significance had been immense and ongoing. We remain in touch and exchange the odd text. He sends me photos of his son. It was important for the both of us to meet up again, for him as there were unresolved feelings, for me to see how the inexorable evanescent chain of meanings had developed and also to accept the responsibility I still felt for him, 27 years later. Colleagues I have told about this have questioned my judgment and 'professionalism'. I am comfortable with my decision.

> "Particular questions must receive particular answers; and if the series of crises in which we have lived since the beginning of the [20th] century can teach us anything at all, it is, I think, the simple fact that there are no general

standards to determine our judgments unfailingly, no general rules under which to subsume the particular cases with any degree of certainty" (Arendt, 2003: vii)

I echo Smith's (2018:35) call to reassert the moral impulse, "…which might be called benevolence, sympathy or community as integral to what it is to be human." It all boils down to one instruction to the practicing social worker "Care!"

4.4. Epistemology - Forms of social work knowledge – Paper 1

My initial interest in epistemology arose from practice experiences, as a worker and team manager, of court work and having presented cases to court and argued for a particular outcome to have that conclusion run by other professionals jointly instructed to bring their perspective. Usually this took the form of a psychologist who may meet with the parents on one or two occasions, run a battery of personality tests and then submit a report. In almost all cases they tended to agree or amplify the social worker's position, but courts seemed to be able to arrive at a decision with their report tucked safely into the evidence bundle. My previous work (Smeeton & Boxall, 2011) flagged up how birth parents experienced this, so I began to ask questions as to the status of different professional knowledge bases. This is the paper that arose in which I draw heavily upon Aristotle's descriptions of three forms of knowledge; theoria, poesis and praxis. I then use Arendt's work to argue that social work needs to re-prioritise its epistemological emphasis towards praxis as the most valued form of knowledge. I give examples as to how different knowledge forms may construct the service user and how practice might be skewed from each position.

Throughout this paper I am adopting purist definitions of concepts originally defined by Aristotle – especially 'theory' and 'art', in an attempt to put them in their rightful place; theory as a universalising, totalising form of knowledge; art as a highly technicalised form of productive knowledge. These definitions allow an exploration of the eternal question as to whether social work is an art or a science, and for us to recognise it as both, but more importantly to recognise it distinctly as 'practice' and to look for ways to prioritise and valorise that as a form of knowledge. This allows us to think of social workers as producers of knowledge who can develop new, unique understandings of the people they work with or as 'theorists' – people who generate new unique understandings, rather than theoreticians – those who apply established theory to their practice. The unhelpful use of the doxic definition of 'theory' here confuses my message somewhat. In this sense theory is more helpfully read as 'hypotheses'.

4.5. Methodological contributions - Social Work as applied phenomenology – Papers 4, 5, 6.

There are two aspects to my work within papers 4, 5 & 6 that I think may have future relevance and could stand as a particularly unique contribution to the fields of social work academia and indeed social work practice. I will deal with them separately here, but I also do not wish to introduce a false division between the two as that is unhelpful and feeds into the anti-intellectualism that infects some aspects of social work and the anti-praxis that infects too many elements of the academy.

I argue that my methodological approach in researching and producing these papers is phenomenological. Writing phenomenologically, as does Levinas, happens through careful description, the primary aim of which is to convince you of an experience and only latterly to compare it to a wider philosophy (Large, 2015). Whether or not I have been successful in this is for others to judge, but my intention throughout was to carefully describe a particular construct and then to interrogate it for meaning by first of all setting aside my taken-for-granted assumptions.

These three papers all focus on different elements of risk and how the risk paradigm impacts upon practice decisions: paper 4 interrogates risk using Heidegger's ontological approach; paper 5 moves closer to a phenomenology of risk by examining social workers' embodied experiences of risk drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's ideas around embodiment; and paper 6 argues for abandonment of the risk paradigm and moves the argument towards a focus on ethics. In reality the 3 papers were one long project that all attempted to carefully describe 'risk' within social work and to make its familiarity strange in order to unsettle its place. While there are a number of papers within the social work literature that have adopted phenomenology as a method these have tended to be more in the tradition of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009) as a way of approaching empirical qualitative work. Indeed, that has been my own approach in papers 2 and 3 in order to privilege the accounts of the research participants and bracketing out the assumptions of the researchers. What I have tried to do within papers 4,5 & 6 is to use phenomenology as an approach to philosophizing social work.

As part of this project I have had to engage with epistemological, ontological, methodological, ethical and practice aspects of social work and have along the way argued for its value as an approach (mainly in papers 4 and 5). I have regularly come back to examining the two main branches of theory that traditionally inform social work, those of psychology and sociology and questioned the entrenchment of the two camps as ways of informing practice (paper 1 & 5). I have tried to point out that both approaches in effect tend to totalize individuals by imposing external criteria to them, reductively constructing them as knowable, and then projecting their lives deterministically into the future as products of their experiences and contingencies.

The thrust of this project has been to argue that social work does need to draw upon a broad knowledge base but if it can see itself as a unique discipline it does not have to seat itself permanently within one camp or the other and to declare epistemological war on the other. Social Work needs to rise above the two and see itself, I argue, as applied philosophy, recognizing the limits of both sociology and psychology and to champion the agency of the individual and recognise their capacity to find their own meaning. I have presented these three papers to different audiences, once to a British Sociological Association study group on risk, and once to the British Society of Phenomenology conference on applied phenomenology. It has gone down well at both and I think the strength of the approach is to straddle intellectual traditions while at the same time interrogating the nuts and bolts of practice.

> "All that is human is outside, say the social sciences. It is all outside and everything in me is open. Is it certain that subjectivity, in this exposure to all winds, is lost among things or in matter? Doesn't subjectivity signify precisely by its incapacity to shut itself up from inside?" (Levinas, 2006:62)

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> "To practise social work in the 'lifeworld', in the spirit of a phenomenological
> paradigm, is to acknowledge the primacy of the human subject and to
> fundamentally grasp the nature of his or her ontology." (Houston, 2014:93-94)

My project to move social work practice closer to phenomenology is, unsurprisingly, not new. Houston (2014) recognises bracketing pre-conceived assumptions about a person's lifeworld not only helps to strive for the essence of the person's meaning system but is also an act of deep empathy and reflexivity. In order to carry out such a complex cognitive task, Houston (2014) argues that social workers need emotional intelligence and their organisations need to provide staff with supervision conducted through a phenomenological lens. What is surprising is that we are nowhere near having achieved this move into the phenomenological and remain stuck in the logjam created by epistemological clashes, managerialism and moral panics. I cannot agree more obsequiously with Houston's assertion that:

> "The aim of social work assessment is not primarily to fulfil a system's function
> or goal, but to grasp what is at the heart of a service user's thinking about
> himself, his identity, his relationship to significant others, his view of his future
> and general attitude to his social world. This is an inquiry into the nature of a
> person's typifications, her taken-for-granted assumptions." (Houston, 2014:
> 94)

This is a particularly Schutzian phenomenology that has lots of traction within sociology and ought to offer more common ground for future exploration. It particularly opens up a space for exploring the sacred cow of reflective practice, which has been subsumed into managerialist agendas. Reflection has lost its purpose, certainly does not seem to be effective within supervision and it is maybe time to set it aside. The job that needs doing is to find meaning by setting aside assumptions and prejudices and making sense of what is laid bare. This is an act of phenomenological reduction - bracketing the taken for granted, carefully describing the phenomenon as it appears to consciousness for the embodied social worker and

interrogating it for meaning. Baptista (2018) argues that professionals should be able to position themselves critically in relation to different conceptions of humanity and to different paradigms. "This explains the extension of the etymological meaning of ethics, understanding that…ethics corresponds, above all, to a requirement of reflexivity that precedes, bases and encompasses morality" (Baptista, 2018: 5).

I believe that phenomenology also has the capacity to examine other social work sacred cows and think that important work such as Ben-Ari and Strier's (2010) critique of cultural competence opens the door to examining anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice by drawing upon Levinasian ethics and re-emphasising the social worker's responsibility to the other.

> "Responsibility is assumed regardless of individual choice. Individuality lies in listening to the call of the others, in being touched by their absolute dignity and their vulnerability." Ben-Ari & Strier (2010:2161)

I intend in future work to explore these areas further and to illustrate phenomenology in social work, not as a particular method or set of tools but as an attitude rooted in an ethics as first philosophy.

4.6. Contributions to wider understandings - Risk and decision-making – Paper 4, 5, 6

Other than the stated aims of my work above, I have always very clearly felt myself to be a social work practitioner and many of the issues I have tried to engage with arose for me while still in a local authority post. There has always therefore been a strong pull for my work to be able to speak directly to practice issues. My time as a child protection social worker and latterly team manager was entirely dictated by the managerialism arising from the New Labour target driven project and lots of important work around the time (e.g. Broadhurst, Wastell & White, 2010) clearly evidenced the devastating impact on practice. The main impact was to focus the need for social workers and their managers to make the right decision in the shortest timescale, which resulted in predominance of the risk paradigm, which is in effect a temporal device claiming abilities to predict future harm. However, once constrained within a very short decision-making window, the accuracy of risk prediction (which is in itself a tautology) is massively reduced and potential harm is likely to be massively over-claimed. If you have only a few days to make risk projections for the rest of a child's life then your ability to assess the here and now and to gauge potential for change and growth are limited so we fall back on mantras which are invariably deterministic and negate agency.

In paper 4 I tried to unsettle the usefulness of the risk construct and to set it within two contexts, firstly the wider 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) and secondly the prevailing mood of anxiety that permeates social work practice due to the above conditions. Rather than this just being a lament to the demise of good social work, I proposed that we instead re-focus on need, hazards and harm as a way to deconstruct risk into bite-size pieces. In paper 5 I tried to examine how practice within this general mood of anxiety, impacts upon practitioners and skews practice decisions and argue for a recognition of embodied practice as a counter to rationality and tool-based processes. Paper 6 is a move to take the discussion beyond risk and onto ethics as the primary focus and this project hopefully concludes with my work in this thesis by

arguing above all other professional issues that ethics should be the primary focus. Decision-making in child protection social work cannot be entirely centred around risk for when that is the case practitioners and organisations become risk averse and likely to opt for the least likely option to put them at risk of professional embarrassment and public outrage. That means more children being brought into care than is necessary and more birth parents having their own needs and rights ignored. However, the obverse to this is that social work has to become more comfortable living with respectful uncertainty (Taylor & White, 2006) and abandoning crystal ball assessment frameworks. In determining which actions are good or bad, de Beauvoir argues that each must remain quite abstract "Ethics does not furnish recipes any more than do science or art. One can merely propose methods." (2004:417)

5. Conclusion

As I indicated in my introduction, my career has been anything but straightforward and coherent and I doubt that what I write here is any kind of conclusion but only a current summation of my thinking up to this point. There are many unanswered questions and potential challenges to this project and my goals for post-doctoral work grow daily. However, I think my assumption of the phenomenological attitude does help a lot of my thought and my social work to coalesce around some core positions that perhaps indicate an alternate approach to social work as is currently designed and practised in England in 2020. The last thing I want to do is to offer a formula for practice but I think a convenient conclusion to my work within the phenomenological attitude to social work that I have tried to elucidate here is to set down some core positions.

First of all – care. The Levinasian position I have discussed above sets the ethical commitment to others as first philosophy and to prioritise that commitment above others including the self, the organisation and the state. This is more than a professional commitment it is a human one that we as social workers should enact in our daily engagements with people who use our services, with their carers and other professionals. There are identifiable virtues that we can draw upon such as kindness, compassion, concern. I have tried to highlight through my work that there are many factors trying to pull us away from this primary ethical commitment, most notably the risk paradigm, but also neo-liberal technical approaches to practice. I have highlighted through Arendt how such bureaucratisation is dangerous in generating a thoughtlessness within practitioners that can end up rationalising and justifying an end without proper attention to the means. However, I also argue from Merleau-Ponty that whatever system practice takes place within, each practitioner can adopt their own ethical position that extends across whatever techniques and processes they are required to use. It is the embodied social worker walking into their lives that people experience. From here on in my core positions should not be thought of as sequential. Only ethics has a priority.

However, there must be an order for me to record them so, secondly, I argue that a phenomenological approach requires the social worker to bracket. To set aside their taken for granted assumptions about what might be happening for the person they are working with. This includes any professional knowledge and theory but does not mean ignoring or erasing those assumptions or knowledge but simply acknowledging they are there and setting them to one side for later examination alongside the service user's account. This practice was first described by Husserl in his original description of phenomenology but has survived the intervening years and all subsequent phenomenologists recognise its value in maintaining the call to get back to 'the things themselves'. This allows a careful description of the phenomenon before you rather than simply resting on your pre-conceptions and allows an interrogation of your assumptions.

Thirdly - listen. We have to privilege the individual's account of their lives and to reach towards a thick rich description of the meanings and understandings they have of their life-worlds. This shines through in Schutz's phenomenology that I adopted in Smeeton & Boxall (2011) but is also central to Heidegger's and Arendt's ontology and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology. My highly selective use of Heidegger does completely accept his ontological description of *Dasein* in that each human existence is situated and there is no duality between self and environment. Therefore humanity is plural and we have to recognise and value the uniqueness of each life-world, hence Arendt's description of the human *condition* rather than an acceptance of any essential human nature. Listening however, is not a purely linguistic act in embodied practice but it is also about listening to your own bodily experience of doing the work and how those sense perceptions are impacting upon your thought processes. How have the sights, smells, sounds, touches you have experienced informed your perceptions of what is happening and changed how you are able to listen to the narratives presented to you?

Fourthly – Act in the Arendtian sense of the word. I described in paper 1 (Smeeton, 2015) the Arendtian distinctions between different forms of the active life and how practice has been reduced in most part to Labour in maintaining systems. However, I also describe Work which has a tendency to construct people who use services as products. Mainly I argue for social work to draw upon praxis as the most valued form

of knowledge as a way to undertake Action, which in this sense is action with others that recognises their uniqueness and is open to the infinite possibilities through natality in developing new narratives and understandings.

Finally – Theorise. I have tried throughout my work to reject universalizing or totalising forms of knowledge that Aristotle termed – *theoria* or knowledge of things that do not change. Metanarratives such as psychodynamic theory, Marxism etc. that try make universal claims to truth are unhelpful in social work and I have argued (Smeeton, 2015) that when we adopt and use one theory as a tool it becomes a sledge hammer. Maslow (1966:15) said that "If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail." So I strongly argue against social workers simply adopting a theoretical position and using it technically. In this position they are theoreticians – theory technicians. Rather I argue that if humanity is plural then we need to reach a new understanding of each person based predominantly upon their own meanings and understandings that we acquire through careful listening, but we can try to make sense of that with others and try to find an understanding together through theorising. Here is where other theory might be helpful and I adopt Arendt's argument that theory is a useful space for thought. Here the social worker is a theorist rather than a theoretician. In theorising we can interrogate other understandings but ultimately straddle and transcend the deterministic tendencies of sociology and psychology to fix and explain the human condition externally to the humans they seek to understand.

I have not and will not organise those positions into an acronym and they are not sequential or exclusive steps in a process, but woven together and emanating from a proto-ethical commitment to care, I think they do offer a way back to kindness, care and concern for the humane project of social work. I have also proposed within this thesis that if ethics are prior to knowledge then we can only ever set provisional imperatives and need to remain open to emerging knowledge and new understandings. This requires us to assume an infinite responsibility towards the people we work with and to beware of finding pemanent solutions. If people have infinite possibilities then we have to have the possibility of helping them achieve them, especially when we have imposed ourselves in their lives so forcefully as agents of the state.

END.

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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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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 serves 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

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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 does not 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: 2042) and is regularly re-shaped by media frenzies around tragedies such as befell Victoria Climbié, Peter Connelly 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; and 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 neoliberal technical approaches to practice (Garrett, 2009) and, I would argue, epistemically sinking. The quest for certainty so that it '. . . will never happen again' leads 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 (Featherstone et al., 2014; Munro and Musholt, 2014; Wastell and White, 2012) 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.

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 and 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 a 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: 78).

What we find are syntheses and appropriations of thought from other disciplines being applied with varying degrees of success such as Hayes and Houston's (2007) use of Habermas in combining critical theory with Schutz's phenomenology as a way of theorising 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 (Smeeton and Boxall, 2011; Gibson, 2014; Nordberg, 2014) as well as ethnomethodological work that has had significant impact upon practice (Broadhurst et al., 2010). While Bourdieu (2012) 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 characterised herself as a phenomenologist (Moran, 2000) and is a glaring omission from some textbooks (e.g. Dreyfus and Wrathall, 2009), many of her arguments come from her time as Heidegger's (1919–20) 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: 9–10), 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: 24–25) 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. Cash, 2001; Gitterman and White, 2013; 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 and White, 1981: 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: 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 (Aristotle, 2009; Dreyfus and Wrathall, 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 (2009), 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. Aristotle describes the need for practical knowledge in understanding the *variables* that are not 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 (Hayden, 2014; Higgins, 2011; Villa, 1996) that Arendt is fundamentally an Aristotelian, but her refinement breathes fresh life into his ideas. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt (1958) challenges Aristotle's view that *theoria* is a superior form of knowledge and instead 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: 22–23)

According to Higgins (2011: 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: 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 minimise 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: 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: 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 –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: 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: 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 and 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 as it robs people of their potential for agency. 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 and 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 cannot 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 cannot 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 own life 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 recognise that some of what we do currently is not 'action' but 'process', which removes 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. (Arendt, 1958: 322)

To illustrate the difference between 'action' and 'process', we need look no further than the recommendations that flow from published serious case reviews intended to promote learning and improve practice. Brandon et al. (2011) conclude that many of the recommendations following a child death or serious injury result in a proliferation of tasks that add new layers of prescriptive activity and leave little room for professional judgment, or, I would also argue, concern. Rather than strengthening supervision and supporting reflective practice, the tendency is to recommend more training for social workers and to create new or duplicate procedures. If we look at how these recommendations translate into what the social worker is expected to do, we see processes laid out that stipulate how often children

should be visited, who should be spoken to and how the visit should be recorded, rather than to 'act' with concern for the service user.

> If a young person has been reported missing the allocated social worker should undertake a statutory visit within three working days of the child's return and must complete a missing exemplar, 'Placement Information Record' and importantly a return interview should be completed.... consideration should be given as to whether the placement meets the child's needs. (Liverpool SCB Procedures Manual, 2014.)

While this clearly sets out a social worker's duty to consider why a young person might have gone missing from care, it would be perfectly possible to comply with this procedure without the young person feeling that the social worker has any human concern for their well-being. Caring for children is reduced to *Labour* reliant upon procedures being followed and feeding the information system. This often leads to the compliance culture that Munro (2011) refers to in describing practitioners focused on 'doing things right' rather than 'doing the right thing'.

If we were to translate this into a piece of *Work*, the social worker might be advised that when a young person goes missing from care, it is important for them to ensure the placement is able to keep the young person safe by working with them and the carer towards the goal (product) of a stable, secure placement. This requires *poeisis* in knowing how to work with the carer and young person to produce a stable placement and possibly *technê* in applying techniques to achieve that goal.

I would argue that a social worker's *Action*, in the Arendtian sense of the word, when a young person is missing from care might include beginning the above guidance by requiring that the allocated social worker show concern for the young person by acting to assure themselves that the child is now safe and well and that the young person has the opportunity to talk to them about why they went missing, any worries they might have and explore any potential harm they may have come to. It is hard to proceduralise 'concern', but seating social work back into its Rogerian roots may lead it towards *phronêsis*.

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 which have to a large extent been welcomed by the academic and practice communities with many local authorities adopting strengths-based approaches such as "Signs of Safety" (Munro, 2011; Turnell and Edwards, 1999). While I also welcome coherent approaches to engaging with children and their families (Smeeton, 2013a, 2013b) there is a real and present danger that social workers may rely only on their knowledge (*technê*) of the tools and their application and thus become 'technicians'.

The other danger is that practice may become measured not by the quality of the analysis but by the completion of the task and I have already heard of social workers criticised 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: 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: 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' (Garrett, 2009; Ruch et al., 2010).

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: 192). Others recognise that the complexity of the activity that child protection social workers engage in makes the identification and measurement of outcomes extremely difficult (e.g. Forrester et al., 2013). According to Higgins (2011: 100) ''...the frailty of action lies in its unpredictability, its irreversibility and its evanescence''. Human action cannot 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-centered 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 recognise, 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 is 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: 359) was a decisive step in the development of both existentialism and phenomenology.

Martinez-Brawley and 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: 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 which 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*.

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Funding

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APPENDICES