

Social Work on the Edge: Not Knowing, Singularity and Acceptance.

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Abstract:

Social work has never been an easy task. Fraught with uncertainty, social workers are charged with making sense of the present and predicting the futures of people, places and events that represent perpetual possibility. As aspects of perception come into view, their appearance is shaped by structures and status states of individual and collective creation that afford security, yet limit and restrict. This conceptual paper explores the act of ‘knowing’, considering it to be an active process, shaped by emotion and bound by contingent and expectant contexts that limit the possibilities of the future, through the collective self-imposition of ideas of knowing and of how the world works. It is suggested that emancipation from limited understandings and subjugated positions lies in an acceptance of that which cannot be known, together with an enhanced connection with who we are, enabled and supported by social work’s core values. The paper’s intent is to stimulate debate of an alternate future that enables and emboldens us to reach beyond organisational and self-imposed limitations that serve to reproduce disadvantage and social injustice. In doing so, it takes a reflective, psycho-social approach that offers a space for critical and transformative thought – the starting point for transformative, value-based, practice.

Key-words:

Knowing, emotion, acceptance, values, critical, emancipation, risk.

Introduction:

This article explores the contingent nature of knowing as it influences how people live their lives and the impact it has upon social work practice. Accordingly, the view of reality informing the stance taken by the author is neatly reflected in Anderson’s musing that ‘Reality construction is a process, and although some constructs may be tenacious they are

still only temporary manifestations of a dynamic flow of thought that no philosophy or science has yet been able to map or describe in its entirety' (1990, p. 68). Thus, this paper adopts a constructivist approach, characteristically befitting the uncertain and contingent attributes of social work. In doing so, it weaves together a range of concepts, including those from psycho-social perspectives, critical theory and psychoanalysis, and, as such, mirrors social work's multi-faceted nature as a largely applied discipline.

The central tenet of the paper is that, as human beings, we often stand on the edge of understanding and that our attempts to see things more clearly, to attain a clearer perception or a valid and reliable interpretation, are fraught with challenge and frustration – challenges and frustrations which can be found within the psycho-social worlds of individuals and the structures that surround them, at times, both significantly influenced by emotion and expectation. In terms of social work practice, the main concern is that the ability of social workers to realise social justice, empowerment and emancipation is in jeopardy if they are unable to know as fully as they possibly can. Part of enhancing 'knowing' involves a critical questioning of that which is thought to be 'known', of how it came to be and of how some individuals and powerful groups have come to exert influence over others. Thus, this paper seeks to unsettle some of the ways in which knowledge formation and interpretation takes place, at both a collective, societal, level and in practice: transformation and change depend upon it.

Throughout the paper connections are made to social work practice in the UK and, reflecting the author's practice experience, when examples of practice are given, a particular focus is on child and family social work.

Background:

Interpretations often come into being as a result of the exchanges people, including professionals, have with each other. In conversations about the various psycho-social worlds that surround them, past, present and, indeed, future. As such these interpretations are based, in part, on collective will. A will which enables the construction and definition of frameworks which frequently provide some level of cohesion and social order. Behind these constructions of order, of systems, of the way the world works, individual perceptions of

status states and understandings of the world can be both delicate and fragile, sustained by structural mechanisms that create what are perceived to be unequivocal ways of being or ways things *should* be. The power of these mechanisms is undeniable - yet, as later discussed, fallible - their power lying in the ability to simultaneously promote both agency and acquiescence.

What gives these frameworks, like neo-liberalism, patriarchy, class hierarchies, the dominance they have is vastly complicated. Taking neo-liberalism as an example, is its longevity and perceived inevitability sufficiently explained by Marx's idea of 'false consciousness', which causes the individual to be unable to experience or recognise social relations 'as historical accomplishments that can be transformed' (Agger, 1991, p. 108) or is it more closely aligned to Habermas' concept of colonizing the life world, where societal systems, such as markets and bureaucracies, 'lead to changes in values and beliefs that are necessary in order to make the systems work more effectively' (Anderson, 1990, p. 252)? Or is it due to something entirely different? While this paper's purpose and scope is limited in answering such questions, the point is to illustrate that some constructed structures are extremely powerful, enduring and have consequences, intended or otherwise, that can subjugate individuals or groups of individuals. Particularly those from disadvantaged or minority groups (for example see Cabinet Office, 2017).

Those who have been marginalised - through processes such as those described above - can come to represent a threat to ways of life. They become the 'Others'. Within this version of reality 'Others' come to engender concern and anxiety (Warner, 2015), sometimes due to the limitations in current understanding that cannot always accommodate difference. The parameters of perpetuated 'truths' prevent it. In working with individuals who are disadvantaged, who have been abused or neglected, practitioners are taken to people and places pushed to the edges of society, where uncertainty flourishes. These are emotive places, yet social workers can shy away from talking about emotions, sometimes finding them difficult to articulate (see Ingram, 2013), something that perhaps belies a perception that the emotional and irrational dimensions of human-beings are less favourable than cognition and rationality (Ruch, 2012) - qualities commonly associated with conditions of certainty. Paradoxically, practitioners can mute or avoid cognitive thought processes and allow emotion to uncritically drive action. In each case something is excluded, a source of data neglected, an element of themselves, or others, cut out – not accepted.

When considering the socioeconomic-political landscape, social workers could be forgiven for feeling that a new approach is needed. Especially so, given the tasks that they are charged with undertaking, particularly in times of social and political change – notable here is the result of the UK’s referendum to leave the European Union, an event that could have a profound impact on social work in the UK in terms of changes to legislation covering, for example, human rights, social protections and welfare provision. In attempting to make sense of what faces them in practice, workers may be filled with a sense that their ability to exercise professional agency is diminished, restricted maybe, by the world that surrounds them, often evoking feelings of discomfort and incongruence: a world which may feel at odds with the core values of social work. For these are aspirational values, seated within the helping relationships found at the heart of good practice, values which can often feel choked by the environments in which they reside. As societies have endeavoured to move forward equipped with a bold sense of direction and purpose, there has been a desire to instil a sense of certainty, together with sentiments of individual self-determination, perhaps in a bid to provide some degree of immunity from the complexities of an ever evolving world. In the context of modernity, transformations in ways of living have been tied to reason and rationalisation (for example, see Webb, 2006). Advanced by the twin engines of knowledge generation and economic wealth, this perceived progress seemingly offers reassurance of some kind, bestowing upon us a sense of actualisation and individual control.

In the UK this has been supported and encouraged by a welfare state espousing choice as a means to secure wellbeing (for example Department of Health, 2005; 2016), supported by a ‘what works’ approach to welfare provision. While this paper does not seek to revisit past discussions about such an approach (Dore, 2006), it is helpful to situate debate within the prevailing context of individualisation, promoted through notions of choice and the ability to select, where responsibility lies at the door of the individual (Beck, 2006). An approach premised on and informed by ‘knowledge’ and ‘evidence’, notions historically shaped by positivist perspectives that seek to explain and predict, epitomised by a commitment to ‘absolutes and certainty’ (Ruch, 2007, p. 171). However, there is arguably a growing disconnect and refutation of the structural mechanisms that once satisfied, the global world fraught with convulsions, a global civilization coming together and, at the same time, in the process of falling apart (see Anderson, 1990) – an observation arguably more poignant today than when Anderson asserted it almost 30 years ago. The constructs that once helped to

explain and make sense of the world are being outgrown, potentially obsolete. Seen through the lens of a risk discourse, institutions once viewed as trusted managers of risk now also become sources of risk (Beck, 2006). Under these conditions, individuals - both at a general and specific, practitioner, level - experience a growing sense of inadequacy: faced with a lack of adequate nuance, vacuums appear in spaces that once felt assured. For social work this poses a challenge, not necessarily about what social work should be, but how it is aligned to the task at hand, whilst retaining its core values and avoiding an 'abyss of relativism' (Taylor and White, 2001, p. 53) that could threaten moral frameworks that represent and sustain values like social justice. Here, perhaps societies would do well to consider what is it that they should work towards accepting, orientating individuals towards or even liberating individuals from, if they are to be successful in equipping social work well for the task ahead, so that an emancipatory path can be found through the structural constructs that often act as sources of oppression.

Some influences on how we 'know':

Social work requires committed mental effort (Webb, 2006). For many practitioners this effort is likely to be inextricably bound to feelings of doubt, caution and even anxiety, as workers endeavour to make sense of the world and to take action that best fits the situation before them. Questions like 'how do I know when I have got it right?' or 'how do we know what we know?' (Shaw, 2013, p. 241) may have an all too familiar ring to them, yet lack rational explanation (Lawrence, 2012) even in the face of that which is seemingly routine. While practitioners can assert professional judgement, it is doubtful that they can ever be sure. At best social workers understand alongside those with whom they are seeking to work and protect (Holland, 2011) and should be mindful that their judgements represent a form of knowledge that is in a continuous state of becoming. Within this sits the ability of practitioners to make decisions in conditions of high uncertainty, avoiding paralysis whilst simultaneously moving forward in the realisation of positive change, whether it be emancipation, justice or well-being. To do so demands much resilience and preparation for this is a seemingly impossible task.

It should, therefore, come as no surprise that the demands social workers face can result in higher levels of stress than that experienced by other occupational groups (Grant, Kinman, &

Baker, 2013); a phenomena undoubtedly fuelled by the relatively high degree of not knowing that social workers are asked to tolerate as part of their daily practice, particularly so given the context is frequently 'risk-ridden, uncertain and anxiety-provoking' (Ruch, 2012, p. 1316). Not to know sets individuals on the edge of something, apart, distanced. It creates a tension between worlds, captured in Turri's assertion that: 'We value a match between mind and world, and knowing is the most general attitude in which mind matches world, which explains why we value knowing' (2010, p. 205). Misplaced efforts to resolve such a tension can perhaps explain why, at points of assessment, some social workers have been found to display verificationist tendencies (Holland, 2011), in part, becoming fixed on an initial hypothesis which impedes the search for information that might refute it (Taylor and White, 2006). Consequently, decision making is, in some instances, made on the basis of a search seeking a satisfactory conclusion or a 'good enough option' (Kirkman & Melrose, 2014, p. 45); the level of efficacy seemingly capped, undone by the sheer volume of possibilities that exist in the inner and outer worlds (Schofield, 1998) of those with whom the practitioner seeks to work, the social interactions being 'too complex for us to predict' (Webb, 2006, p. 140).

In conditions of uncertainty and complexity (Munro, 2011), practitioners are charged with navigating spaces and times that often have few tangible qualities. Yet attempts to produce an assessment, a judgement, must and are made. In this sense, knowledge becomes something that is not passive, but active. Arguably, in entailing processes of construction, knowledge is better conceived of as 'not "something out there" that you discover but an activity – something that you *do*' (Engebretsen, Vøllestad, Wahl, Robinson and Heggen, 2015, p.529, original emphasis). Practitioners construct, piece together, build an understanding which represents a version of reality (Dore, 2016), based on their perceptions and interpretations. The process of assessment is then an interpretive activity, where no single objective 'truth' can be defined (Helm, 2011), contingent upon the products of social relations, such as risks and emotions (Warner, 2015). To achieve what is expected of them, practitioners seek, gather and compare data, both new and pre-existing. Drawing on Lonergan's ideas of knowing, Engebretsen et al (2015) describe a situation whereby coming to know is channelled through a process of questioning which facilitates the giving of meaning to that which is initially perceived, this is then weighed against existing understandings enabling hypothesis refinement, supported by narrower questioning.

Accepting these premises, the status of knowing can be seen to be progressive and evolutionary. In practice this may prove challenging, not least given the necessity to exercise judgement to shape intervention, yet practically it may involve equipping social workers to ‘maintain a position of “respectful uncertainty”’ (Taylor and White, 2006, p.950) so that premature and potentially poor judgements are given the space to be further scrutinised.

On the ground, a worker’s senses are exposed to an array of stimuli, offering data for analysis, interpretation and assessment, acts that entail the interplay of cognitive and affective elements (Munro, 2011) and which transform what the worker perceives into understanding. Having established, as Turri succinctly concludes, that ‘perceiving does not entail knowing’ (2010, p205), it is important to consider the role of expectation in shaping understanding. In making the afore mentioned assertion, Terri illustrates that individuals may perceive phenomena yet disbelieve what they see, or that based on what they see, they may believe something to be the case but, in fact, what they see is not what they believe it to be. In both instances the ability to know is diminished by the unchecked application of prior knowledge and associated *expectation*. An assimilation process, like that considered by Engebretsen et al (2015), has not been rigorously activated. It appears that after a surface reading, the presenting situations have not warranted it. In many instances understanding, based on recognition, is likely to have involved some kind of heuristically triggered response that influences expectations of what is likely to occur next - evident in the initial stages of recognition primed decision-making models (Kirkman & Melrose, 2014). While heuristic processes offer a level of functionality that performs reasonably well, they can be susceptible to undue bias and distortion (see Munro, 2011), rendering individuals unconsciously incompetent.

In the contested environment of practice (Helm, 2011; Taylor and White, 2006) somatic sensations, an increased heart rate, changes to body temperature and breathing, along with subsequent feelings become sources of data that can act as the foundation for knowledge (Lawrence, 2012). Emotions evidence the presence of information that is provocative in some way, thereby indicating phenomena worthy of conscious exploration, along with providing data about what vulnerable others may be feeling and experiencing (see Ferguson, 2005, pp. 792-793), in doing so emotions intuitively influence the process of knowing. Moreover, the elicitation of an emotional response offers a window into the individual’s moral character and, therefore, moral action (for example, see Keinemans, 2015). Hence,

there should be some appreciation of the limits of formal knowledge to provide the answers to everything (Taylor and White, 2006) and social work be embraced, as both a 'practical-moral activity' and a 'technical-rational' one (Taylor and White, 2001, p. 47), the realisation of good practice a combination of artistic and scientific components (England, 1986) which the competent practitioner successfully brings together.

To do so, the practitioner must contend with a multitude of competing data and associated narratives, arriving at an interpretation that approaches 'knowing'. To a large extent this is attained by 'knowing' others, in part, based on a prescription of understandings linked to a categorical role, the role having been ascribed to someone (for example see Rossiter, 2011; Taylor and White, 2006). For instance, in society we have an understanding of the attributes of 'loving', 'protective', 'caring'. These are examples of characteristics that are likely to be prescribed to the role of 'mother', a role which is ascribed to certain individuals; predominantly those who identify as female and have given birth to and/or care for a child. Thus, shared language and shared meanings are created and these help construct certainty, an ability to know. For Rossiter, knowledge of others is totality, totalities being 'the concepts we deploy that allow us to feel that we know or understand another person' (Rossiter, 2011, p.983).

Desires for totality arguably increase as things change and people and societies feel less certain. The quest for totality can be aided when specialist knowledge becomes popular and accessible to all, emerging as self-evident knowledge (Green, 2000), revealing common sense rules to live by, where conventional assumptions drive actions in familiar situations (Taylor and White, 2006). Apparent here is the danger that in an eagerness to recognise the familiar and engage with it in an uncritical and unquestioning way, there is a failure to see the false and limited certainties for what they are. A collectivist rhetoric, premised on sameness, emerges which possess the capacity to erode debate as the act of 'invoking common sense reinforces an 'us – them'' divide' (Warner, 2014, p.1645). The 'us' being the many, the 'them' being the Other, the outcast, the threat. This apparent sameness and shared values of the speaker and the audience (see Green, 2000) in fact works against difference and ambiguity, reinforcing the dominance of one group over the other. This togetherness also creates a distance, imposing a wall between alternate knowing states, between politician and social worker, between social worker and the people with whom social workers seek to work.

Transactions between others and emotion help to develop a sense of reality:

The knowing and understanding that emerges from the interactions between individuals and the worlds that surround them is often shaped by emotion which provides the ‘impetus for action or omission’ (Dore, 2016, p.469), its transformative properties perhaps most profoundly seen in its intimate connection with moral judgement (see Ingram, 2013; Pastötter, Gleixner, Neuhauser and Bäuml, 2013; Warner 2015). In embodying shared and collective qualities (Lupton, 2013), conditioned by context (Sebrant, 2008), emotions can largely be considered as manifestations of constructed and evolved responses. As a product of relationships with others, emotions consequently influence future relationships in an ongoing exchange, with emotion, and risk, ‘inevitably and always configured via social and cultural processes and through interaction with others’ bodies, material objects, space and place’ (Lupton, 2013, p. 634).

Once realised, emotion, provoked by figures in or professing a position of authority, is not easily tamed, the unintended consequences culminating in the incitement and reproduction of ‘stigmatisation, marginalisation, blaming and exclusion of a certain social group it targets’ (Lupton, 2013, p. 645). Here, risk becomes loaded with negative association. Moreover, as a socially constructed phenomenon, it can be seen that ‘some people have a greater capacity to define risks than others’ (Beck, 2006, p. 333), including politicians and the media (Warner, 2014; 2015). Emotions and risk, therefore, intertwine in an ‘assemblage’, each shaping the other (Lupton, 2013, pp. 640-641), with power relations influencing the expression and provocation of emotion, evident even in the daily practices of professionals (see Sebrant, 2008). The ‘Other’ becoming increasingly ostracised by the ‘Us’.

In intertwining with risk, emotions help to create versions of reality that can harden, taking hold to become transmitted as knowledge where ‘socially determined and dynamic patterns of collective sense making and decision taking’ (Gray and Schubert, 2012, p.209) play out in a cooperative, if unchecked, way. A significant part of what individuals, and specifically social workers, think they know about risk is based on a perceived understanding which is set at least one step away from it. As risk is perceived to increase, so too does the anxiety attributable to it. In response, some of the rational-technical approaches employed in social work practice resemble not just an attempt to manage risk but to manage anxiety about risk

(Warner, 2014). Such anxiety is frequently present in practice environments, where the fear of the worst case scenario - exaggerated by a corrupted view of risk as inherently negative (see Parton, 2011) - distorts the responses of professionals and their employing organizations. Throughout this assemblage, risks, like other social phenomena, are represented by language. Risk has a voice. Narratives of risk develop and become powerful through collective acceptance. A social construction is born, its existence independent from physical manifestation.

Now, one could say that this is self-evident, risk represents a state of becoming, it is not something tangible but a possibility that one is attempting to predict. However, the point I am trying to emphasise relates to notions of knowing and how we, as professionals, attempt to construct certainty in order to help us go about our daily work. For this, the processes of representation are essential and allow us to create some sense of certainty through a condition described by Searle (2006), wherein epistemic objectivity is established in the presence of ontological subjectivity. Risk now not only has a voice it has a *reality*.

For social workers, assessing need or implementing an intervention, are acts contingent upon an understanding of number of concepts, like roles and risks, that have been ascribed some semblance of reality based on collective intentionality. Consequently, they come to resemble status functions. That is, they perform functions that are not dependent on physical characteristics but upon collective agreement and create power relationships based, for example, on authority, duty, entitlement and obligation (see Searle, 2006). What is particularly interesting here, in terms of knowing, is what happens when the expectations that accompany such concepts are shattered in the face of the unexpected. When a parent seriously harms their child, for instance, the expectations accompanying the concept 'parent' are defied, the apparent horror of such an event prompting painful questions not just of ourselves (see Warner, 2015), but of our sense of knowing. With apparent certainties eroded, individuals, including practitioners, may rush to seek a rational response to that which seems so puzzling and irrational. It is forgotten that *it is* irrational and hope is maintained that risk can be identified and guarded against, however unrealistic this may be (Munro, 2011), the forgetting seated within a missed placed conviction that individuals are rational beings, something that repeatedly plays out in bureaucratic responses that seek to address system failures (for example see Ferguson, 2005; Munro, 2011).

Accompanying these responses are attempts to protect our sense of a tangible, known, self and thus the wider state of knowing that enables the predominant orthodoxy to prevail. This is evident in the ‘moralising talk’ of politicians who present polarized positions, based on moral categories, which create the ‘Other’ (Warner, 2014, p.1641). The Other, already painted as problematic, as different, often already marginalised through poverty (Hoggett, Wilkinson and Beedell, 2013; Warner, 2015), becomes a conduit for action via the stirring of emotion which seeks some kind of justice (see Hoggett et al, 2013; Warner, 2014). The demand for action, driven by emotion, going on to exert influence over policy and practice - as seen in the tragic case of baby Peter Connelly (Warner, 2015).

Susceptible to manipulation (for example see Keinemans, 2015; Pastötter et al, 2013) emotion is a very much a malleable quantity. Combine this with its potential to influence moral judgement (Ingram, 2013; Pastötter et al, 2013; Warner 2015) and it is easy to see how an uncritical reading of ourselves and the world provides us with certain assurances. Emotions can reassure, because they are felt. This makes them tangible, at the same time as anchoring individuals, in some way, to the external worlds around them. If emotional reactions to external, seemingly incomprehensible, events are mobilised and become the emotional experiences of the many, not only is the ‘us-them’ divide strengthened, so too is the path towards the black-boxing of what is ‘known’ - the transformation of uncertainty into something ‘certain’. Crucially, the shared feelings, such as anger provoked to elicit action (see Warner, 2014), *correspond* with expectation: anger demands justice, it demands punishment. Such reactions seemingly fit with events now categorically defined in simple moralistic terms.

In offering some level of reassurance, it is not to say that the experience of emotion is universally comfortable, far from it. Rather that, in being felt emotions can provide a greater sense of reality because they offer a connection between others and a shared version of morality, an individual’s moral evaluations being shaped by how they feel about the issues that face them (Warner, 2015). A connection made possible given that emotions are, for the most part, responses to incidents that initially reside in external worlds. As such, emotions can be seen to be rooted in a reality and are ‘informative with regard to this reality’ (Keinemans, 2015, p. 2183). In terms of uncomfortable experiences, emotion may be associated with states of confusion, anxiety or debilitation, especially when faced with situations that are unfamiliar. In these situations what has gone before and the assumptions

individuals hold about themselves, others and the world may feel unsettled: the individual comes to realise that they do not know as they thought they did and they do not know what it is that they do not know. Dormant here are opportunities for transformation and enlightenment. What is needed is the curiosity to interrogate the understandings held and the knowing states that guide them.

If social workers are to better their 'knowing', their critical thinking must then embrace ideology critique, a process where individuals come to recognise how dominant ideologies, uncritically accepted, are 'embedded in everyday situations and practices' and how they work to maintain the servility of subjugated groups (Brookfield, 2009, p. 293). Enhancing a critical gaze enables those previously unseen structures to come alive, yet it is likely that there will still be much that remains hidden, knowing states that remain uncertain, despite the best efforts to unpick initial surface readings. How then is this challenge to be met? On the one hand shared meanings create epistemological realities (Searle, 2006) which enable some sense of totality to exist - necessary to avoid the abyss of relativism - yet they can also represent attempts to lay claim to singularity, meaning that individuals can mistake situations that they do not know for those that they do. Somehow, a level of comfort needs to be found within this contradiction, the unsettledness of not ever fully 'knowing' embraced for the benefit of practice (see Rossiter, 2011). This is no easy task, especially when organisational and policy contexts demand time limited assessments (for example, Department for Education, 2015) and where caseloads are high. Valuable thinking space may be lacking, yet social workers, supported by their managers, can, indeed must, engage in reflexive and systemic questioning of that which is 'seen' and thought to be 'known'. Such questioning gives permission to exploring unsettledness, the uncertainty, the emotion. Supervision, if well executed (see Helm 2011), has an integral role to play in facilitating this, helping practitioners to manage and recognise their emotions which, in turn, enables their capacity to think, without 'feeling overwhelmed and out of control' (Sidebotham et al, 2016, p. 244).

Adopting acceptance:

In practice, emotion can be felt as a 'buzz of adventure' (Ferguson, 2011, p. 47), where feelings of anticipation and apprehension are experienced by practitioners as they attempt to make sense of the uniqueness, the singularity, of the individuals with whom they are seeking

to work. Under such conditions it is easy to see how and why surface understandings take hold. During a home visit, for instance, practitioners are frequently assaulted by violent, attention grabbing, data that diverts attention in unconscious ways (see Munro, 2011). Working hard to contain psychological states in order to physically perform the task at hand, minds may become distracted, the subsequent responses of action and reason being performed to the extent that they allow workers to reach a satisfactory conclusion: the optimum outcome is not attained, but the job has been done and the job is good enough. Unfortunately, the emotion present in circumstances like these is often not fully engaged with or reflected upon, severely reducing the chances of social workers being able to adequately assess or evaluate, an eventuality sadly typified by the fatal case of Victoria Climbié in the UK. In Victoria's case, the failure of practitioners involved in her care to acknowledge fear and anxiety, engendered confusion and indecision, resulting in deficient assessment (see Grant, Kinman, and Alexander, 2014), the disgust emoted by her physical condition a barrier to direct engagement (Ferguson, 2011). Through such acts of omission, areas of uncertainty remain unexplored and unchallenged. Interestingly, a limited engagement with emotion may also act as a safety mechanism, protecting practitioners from 'confronting painful truths' (Lawrence, 2012, p. 10) about themselves and others – comfort is found in the enduring versions of existing 'reality'.

Other research also shows that the demanding context of front-line practice can result in professionals keeping a distance from children and their problems and the 'fearfulness or anxiety' experienced by practitioners may 'foster a reluctance to either support or challenge parents' (Sidebotham et al, 2016, p245). The tragic shortcomings of which have been revealed in recent, high profile, Serious Case Reviews - reviews undertaken in parts of the UK when a child has died or has been seriously harmed and where there are concerns about abuse and how professionals worked together (see Department for Education, 2015). Following baby Peter Connelly's death in 2007, the review noted, in respect of professional engagement with his mother: 'The biggest failure of the intervention with Ms A was not to find out how deeply she loved her children or how far she would go out of her way to care for them properly. Very few demands were made on her, either in her care of the children or her care of the home' (Haringey Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2009, p22). In respect of Keanu Williams who died in 2011, the review into his death called for 'Confident professional practice, which proactively seeks out information and is prepared to challenge and question colleagues and parents or significant adults' and 'Supervision, which challenges

the professionals to reflect on their practice...’ (Birmingham Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2013, pp. 72-73).

In practice, attainment of a deeper sense of knowing begins with an abandonment of what appears to be ‘good enough’ and requires workers to be open to questioning the multi-dimensional psycho-social worlds of themselves and others, together with a willingness to stay in uncertainty for longer and to hold on to doubt (Taylor and White, 2006). This is not simply a case of glibly accepting that practice occupies a ‘zone of ambiguity’ (Brookfield, 2009, p. 294) or giving tacit acknowledgement to the shortcomings of actuarial tools deployed to calculate risk (see Kirkman and Melrose, 2014; Webb, 2006), for the aspiration demands more: a repositioning and realignment of perspective that starts with a recognition that assumptions about the world, the people in it and how things should work are ‘*provisional understandings*’ (Brookfield, 2009, p. 295, emphasis added).

From this starting point a process of critical engagement can begin. Liberated and transformative thought is now attainable because it is free from the assumptions, previously accepted unquestionably as common sense, that help to maintain prevailing orthodoxies (see Brookfield, 2009) and associated structural systems that, seemingly, offer some sense of order and cohesion. These systems may allow people and practitioners to go about their daily lives with some sense of certainty, but they are often beholden to powerful groups and powerful individuals within those groups. Important here is the role played by the media, who support the maintenance of the status quo by reporting stories which represent a specific version of reality, one that is both culturally and politically congruent and readily acceptable. In providing, at least on a surface level, ‘credible answers to difficult questions’ (Warner, 2015, p.15) they help to create order out of situations that provoke confusion. The desire for stability, sought in that which can be ‘known’, is fulfilled by stories that are framed and shaped in a way that supports a simplified version of morality - what is good, what is evil. Such stories permeate individuals and society and become internalised understandings of how things are.

Many of these and other narratives found in society describe totalities, represented through binary terms, where the willingness or honesty to say, ‘I’m not sure’ is in short supply. At a societal level, the issue of not knowing intimately relates to how individuals view their place in the world, which turns on their sense of physical and psychological safety and security.

With such vulnerabilities, the reluctance to say, 'we don't know', is illustrative of attempts to maintain current levels of stability, however fragile. Indeed, such a statement could spark instability and position risk as non-compensatable, leading to what Beck describes as the 'problem of not-knowing becoming radicalized' (2006, p.335). Yet, in social work, to attain good, rather than good enough, practice, not knowing requires realisation. This can only be achieved if there is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the limitations of existing conceptual constructs which, while integral to the mechanics of everyday life, work to create totality in a world where 'our representations of persons are always inadequate' (Rossiter, 2011, p. 983), their singularity always just out of reach. In their current form, understandings of humanity and, therefore, of practice, are tied to blocks of knowledge, represented as totalities. Yet such totality is conditional, it is fluid and changeable, and the avoidance of flawed knowledge claims depends on this being remembered.

The inherent flexibility that may be found in conceptual constructs is brought to life by Taylor and White's term 'sturdy relativism' (2001, p. 54). Applied to a society's moral standards, this enables them to be recast and renewed within a given culture (Taylor and White, 2001), whilst also providing a level of functional consistency. Ideology plays an intrinsic role here, influencing how individuals experience the world, including their moral reasoning and, as already considered, their ways of knowing (Brookfield, 2009). As such, by harnessing social work's core values there is an opportunity that change can occur – the first step being to enhance the relationship that individual practitioners have with 'knowing'.

It may be hard to see contingencies for what they are, especially as they are part of the means that helps us all to survive, yet if positive change, such as enhanced social justice and greater emancipation, is to be realised, then this must be what is strived for. To move forward, it will be essential to demonstrate a commitment towards an epistemology that supports these core values of social work, one found in critical theory; an approach that upholds pluralism (DePoy et al, 1999) and which views critical thinking as being transformative in its ability to illuminate, and then change, the inequality perpetuated by dominant ideology as being a normal state of affairs (Brookfield, 2009). As part of the orientation towards an enhanced state of knowing, the way singularity is approached needs consideration. Just as social work sits 'in between' the mainstream and those who are set apart from it (Warner, 2015, p. 15), the ability to know the singularity of individuals and the configurations that surround them sits at the edge of knowing. Rossiter describes this as unsettled practice, that is 'the search

for the self-understanding of others and the need to work on the edge of that self-understanding and our professional representations' (2011, p.993). For Rossiter, this ensures ethics is positioned before knowing, because the stance adopted by the professional performing the knowing is not one striving for totalisation. The individual's singularity is not then violated because it is respected that this cannot be known, 'knowing' has, appropriately, been suspended (see Ruch, 2007).

Moving forward - a call for recognition:

Social workers will forever be confronted with the somewhat problematic position that there will always be more to the presenting issues than can be uncovered through their interventions, as 'absolute certainty or all-encompassing knowledge' (Engebretsen, 2015, p. 530) can never be attained. If a more nuanced and enhanced level of practice is to be realised, rooted in an epistemological understanding that is more reflective and ontologically astute, practitioners and policy makers must first fully embrace those characteristics, such as emotionality and irrationality that form an essential part of who they are. As Lawrence (2012) asserts, part of this entails individuals developing a more sophisticated relationship with their own selves - essentially an increased self-awareness, something that cannot be done without a reflective approach towards the self and others. Reflective practice creates an opportunity for practice that is holistic and balanced. Indeed, in terms of practitioner engagement with types of knowledge, and ultimately what this paper is concerned with is a type of knowledge, a type of 'knowing', 'Reflective practice seeks to balance the dominant 'hard'' types of knowledge associated with positivistic, technical-rational ways of knowing with the 'softer', practical-moral sources of knowledge' (Ruch, 2007, p. 171).

Part of an approach that is reflective, or rather, critically reflective, also entails us, as social workers, recognising our own double hermeneutic (see Giddens, 1987) influences on the worlds that surround us and how these shape our associated understandings of them and of ourselves. In engaging with 'knowing' we would do well to not just interrogate the processes by which our interpretations have been made (see Taylor and White, 2001) but the processes, congruent with ideology critique, that shape and have shaped current orthodoxies. It is, after all, us and the structures we have built who have created the boundaries around ourselves - they are self-imposed. To liberate social work, perhaps what is needed are a few

more of the 'luxuries'; observations, conversations and thoughts (Ruch, 2007, p. 177); that can enable practitioners to connect with who they and their service users are, accompanied by an acceptance that their work is never complete. Social work assessments should remain an 'ongoing process' (Department for Education, 2015, p. 25), within which we, as social workers, have an ability to sensitise society to the conditions that work to create individual and family disadvantage (see Warner 2015) and, in doing so, we stand on the edge of an understanding that offers a different way of knowing. Allied with the core values of social work this offers an alternative future built on acceptance and tolerance of the unknown, encompassing a perspective of solidarity where the divisive 'them' and 'us' is displaced by a welcome acceptance of singularity and a suspension of expectation.

Such change will not occur overnight nor is it likely that a different kind of thinking and 'knowing' will be provoked across all strands of society. One of the biggest challenges for social work is how to realise such change, when so much depends on the interconnectedness of the systems - like those of politics, law, education and economics - that combine to make practice possible in the first place. In exploring social works' relationship with knowing this paper makes a contribution to the pool of questions which relate to how we, as individuals, want to live, considering how social work can play at least some role in shaping something different. Moving forward, it is likely that there will be many more questions raised in relation to what kind of institutions and structures individuals want in their lives and what values they want them to emulate. Others may also wish to contemplate how, by drawing on social work values, there may be opportunities for democratic growth and greater social justice, driven by increased acceptance and a greater tolerance of not fully knowing.

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