Title: Embodied Social Work Practice within Risk Society.

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Introduction

"…psychology, because of its naturalism, had to miss entirely the accomplishment, the radical and genuine problem, of the life of the spirit…"

Edmund Husserl, *The Vienna Lecture, 1935*

One of the key decisions that social work has to make is whether it is based primarily within a psychological understanding of humanity, a sociological understanding or, as we will argue, a phenomenological one? We argue that phenomenology has remained undertheorized in understanding social work hitherto and offers a valuable method through which social work practitioners can understand the lived experience of practitioners and service users. Existing research emphasizes pre-established norms and externally derived criteria when guiding social workers in practice. The more we look at how different theoretical understandings of social work aim to inform the practitioner in applying externally derived meaning to service users' experiences, the more we come to believe that those understandings are superfluous. In fact, what is important is that the practitioner can make sense of the meanings that service users bring to their own experiences, for it is those meanings that will inform their actions, not externally imposed ones.

There is no space to explore the philosophical gulf between the analytic and pragmatic traditions of North America and the UK, and the European continental traditions here, but it is to the latter tradition that this paper belongs. It especially picks up the thread of phenomenology that links Husserl, Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty, sequential but overlapping theorists in the continental tradition. However, each move forward from Husserl's transcendental phenomenology with its focus on 'intentionality', 'eidetic reduction' and the 'constitution of meaning', through Heidegger's existential phenomenology with its focus on the 'lived experience' and 'ontology' and on towards Merleau-Ponty's focus on 'embodiment.' In describing the development of phenomenological thought in this way we aim to orient the reader towards the general tradition of phenomenology which is a fundamental departure away from the limited ontical fields of psychology and sociology.

Edmund Husserl (1982; 1990), the founder of phenomenology, argues that the natural attitude, that is our unthinking prejudices and natural beliefs in the existence of the world, as it is taken-for-granted, needs to be suspended to discern the phenomenological attitude, and understand the

world without bias, assumption, or predisposition. The driving purpose of phenomenological reflection requires the transformation of our mundane and banal experience of the world. The impact of this phenomenological *epoché* (bracketing) is that it allows us to grasp the concrete world which we inhabit not as this or that position, not as emergent from a diversity of opinion, not through taken-for-granted beliefs and assumptions but instead as meaning-laden phenomenon. Glimpsing into the lived experience of our service users while bracketing off our prior assumptions seems to us to be the job of the social worker and is necessarily phenomenological. As Husserl suggests, the purpose of bracketing, is to suspend our belief in the things we take for granted, or our natural belief in what we presuppose to be an objective world. The consequence of bracketing, for Husserl, is that inquiry may focus more sharply on clear and fundamental evidence irrespective of our natural predilections (Husserl, 1990). This is an essential activity to the social worker as practical researcher. Meeting with a plurality of clients means the social worker is naturally embedded in a variety of cultural and social indicators, social prejudices, media inflections, which need to be set aside to see the real lived experience of clients. Berger and Luckmann (1966) drew upon phenomenological philosophy to posit their ideas about social construction which helps us to recognise that subjects need to be understood in contexts and to see the importance of interdependence with the social and political cultures in which they (and we) live. This is essential, however we propose that supplementing this type of analysis with insights gleaned directly from phenomenology, offers the added benefit, of not seeing clients as *just* their contexts.

While phenomenology is increasingly featuring in published work (e.g. Sen, McClelland & Jowett, 2016) we still agree with Webb's (2006, p.17) statement that "To date there has been no comprehensive modelling applying phenomenology to social work" a lack that we are beginning to address in order to recognize that we urgently need to theorize questions of embodiment, context and embedded meaning, as well as understanding the dynamic nature of such formulations. As Lorenz argues:

> "New ontologies for social work advocate 'situated knowledge' as the recognition that knowledge is bounded, embodied, contextual, partial, complex and based on engagement and interconnections rather than on disembodiment and transcendence" (Walter Lorenz, presentation at JSWEC 13th July 2016)

Lorenz's position calls for a paradigmatic shift in the way social work is beginning to orient its ability to understand its work with the people who use its services. We accept and extend that position by arguing for a phenomenology of social work that has the potential to fully explore the ontological issues of situated, embodied lived-experience of service users and social workers and has the potential to offer a deeper level of analysis

than the merely ontical enquiries offered by other approaches. Social Work is unique as a discipline in its potential to understand the totality of what it means to have being-in-the-world rather than aspects of being that become the focus of other analyses. Historically, there has been a focus either on the micro level analysis of psychology, the macro level analysis of sociology or syntheses betwixt the two, which are insufficient. For example, Corby (2006, p.155) describes three main groups of theoretical perspectives to inform an understanding of child protection, which '…derive from different sources, survey the problem at different levels and don't necessarily complement each other'

- Psychological theories which focus on the instinctive and psychological qualities of those that abuse
- Social Psychological which focus on the dynamics between abuser, child and immediate environment
- Sociological perspectives which emphasize the social and political conditions as the most important reason for the abuse

All of these ontical inquiries, rooted in modernity, attempt to explain from an external, rational perspective that lead us down the path of thinking that as long as we know the psychological qualities of the adults, the external social and economic context and the quality of the relationship between the adult and the child then we ought to be able to calculate the likelihood of a particular child being harmed by a particular adult, completely bypassing human agency ie. the capacity to take responsibility for and to make one's own decisions. One of us has previously argued in a preliminary way, that "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." (Smeeton, 2015, p.2)

Three Paradigms for Practice

Psychology

In order to understand the value of phenomenology for social work it is necessary to initially understand the dominant trends of theorizing social work. Firstly, there is the psychological approach. We are profoundly wary of social workers' use of psychology in describing the relationships of people they work with as they often overlook their own subjective self, whilst claiming to objectively explain another subjective self. We agree with Husserl's assertion that:

> "By its objectivism psychology simply cannot make a study of the soul in its properly essential sense, which is to say, the ego that acts and is acted upon." (The Vienna Lecture, 1935)

The psychological stance is usually one that claims theoretical understandings based upon a position that humanity is objectively knowable and the application of that knowledge leads us to believe that

behaviour in certain situations is predictable, negating to varying degrees the capacity for agency. The distinction between phenomenology and psychology is important to understand. The common fulcrum of phenomenological analysis is that all consciousness is intentional or implicitly oriented towards the world (Husserl, 1982). Psychology, on the other hand, attempts to account for psychological content – judging, thinking, imagining as naturalistic processes. While phenomenology has certainly been deployed in the field of psychology, this often remains limited to internal subjective experiences of an external world. The task of phenomenology is to uncover meanings derived from being-in-the-world where no dualism exists between the world and the individual. While psychological meaning is obviously important, we argue that it is still necessary to supplement this with a phenomenological understanding of the lived experience of client and social worker alike. This provides us with a theoretical nexus to negotiate the fraught difficulty between psychological introspection and social atmosphere.

Sociology

It is important to retain the sense of how social work has been understood sociologically, particularly in relation to the concept of risk. Social Work is often more comfortable working from a sociological understanding and indeed there is a wealth of material in this area that seeks to understand the “Risk Society” (Beck, 1992) within which social work is practiced. Webb (2006) characterises the current social work paradigm of neo-liberal social work as located within the sociological period of late-modernity with its focus on risk.

Denney (2005) argues that both Giddens and Beck share a theoretical starting point in seeing risk as central to the development of postmodern/post-traditional societies, although Giddens prefers the term ‘late modernity’. Such societies have replaced belief in fate or the will of gods with an embracing of the uncertainty of risk. A central feature of late modernity is uncertainty about truth claims and scepticism about the ability of experts to predict complex risks which increase mass anxiety. Denney (2005, p.32) roots risk thinking as built upon the assumptions that individuals think of their lives in terms of managing uncertainty and danger and not on major structural inequality. This is a significant step away from social work’s radical and critical traditions. However, it is Beck who set the debate:

> “Through risk, the arrogant assumption of controllability – but perhaps also the wisdom of uncertainty – can increase in influence” (Beck 2007, p.5)

Beck (2007, p.4) describes the two faces of risk as ‘chance and danger’ and defines risks as “the probabilities of physical harm due to given

technological or other processes" but also a systematic way of dealing with hazards and insecurities induced and introduced by modernization itself. His central tenet is that the whole society is infected by a preoccupation with risk and that this in fact defines late modernity. We clamour for certainty whenever we can get it and are disappointed when experts fail to accurately predict or prevent harm. However, he disputes the purported rationality of science to be able to investigate the hazardousness of a risk, based upon speculative assumptions within a framework of probability statements. He also says that in-order to discuss risks meaningfully one must assume an ethical position as risk determinations are based upon mathematical possibilities *and* social interests. This leads, he argues, to an odd straddling between objective and value dimensions which do not assert moral standards openly but in the form of "quantitative, theoretical and causal implicit morality." (Beck, 1992, p.176). Additionally, "Statements on risk are the moral statements of scientised society".

Risk definitions are however a highly effective instrument for steering and selecting economic developments. (Beck, 1992, p.227) which explains why politicians, in justifying spending cuts, will often commission expert reports to offer them the moral statement that will justify their decisions. The Munro Report (2010) was such an exercise in the UK to respond to the tragic death of Peter Connolly. It served as a thorough moral statement of the knowledge base about how risk is dealt with in child protection social work and attempted to tackle Luhmann's (2000 cited in Denney: 2005, p.33) position that the rhetoric of public protection is now greater than the real risk faced by individuals.

Beck (1992, p.23) acknowledges that some people are more affected than others by the distribution of risks due to inequalities of class and strata but argues that the 'boomerang effect' sooner or later also strikes those who produce or profit from them. He goes on to assert that while one can possess wealth one can only be afflicted by risks which are ascribed by civilisation. Therefore, in cases of class and stratification *being determines consciousness*, while in risk positions, *consciousness determines being*. Knowledge therefore gains a new political significance as well as an imperative for philosophical treatment. We will attempt in this work to examine these statements in relation to some ideas from Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty. But what is clear from Beck's work is that "Risk society is a *catastrophic* society. In it the exceptional condition threatens to become the norm." (Beck, 1992, p.24).

Phenomenology

We pose that phenomenology is a comfortable home for social work which has as its central concern an understanding of the lived experiences of people within their contexts, or, what is often referred to as the person-in-environment configuration. Essentially, what we are doing in our broader

work is firstly, theorising the value of phenomenology for social work. Secondly, and more specifically, we are theorising a phenomenology of risk as it pertains to social work practice. The analyses can only remain general within the confines of this article. Generally, a phenomenology of risk would require the application of the following factors to concrete situations in order to more fully theorise social work practice: the recognition and differentiation of risk from threat, the embodiment of risk, survival as a motivating force, the normalisation of risk as a generic human behaviour, the conceptualisation of notions of home and the alien, the rejection of 'absolute security', and full expansion of resilience and vulnerability. While such an undertaking is obviously a bigger project, for now it is enough to argue that phenomenology also has to pay attention to the fact that humans have *care* for their being-in-the-world which is essentially the fundamental social work pre-occupation. It *matters* to us how people live within society. It is also an important ethical imperative to understand people as active agents in their lives and their rights to ascribe meaning to their situations and wherever possible to make their own decisions – their lives matter to *them*. Phenomenology offers the philosophical roots to support such thinking.

Roche (1973) describes the main ideas of the phenomenological school as:

a) Man's (sic) basic distinguishing feature is his ability to know that he is aware of things: Man can be conscious of being conscious of.
b) Consciousness is intentional: Every conscious act refers to an object of some kind.
c) Phenomenological description: There is no way of studying the conscious activity of the experiencer apart from a study of that which he experiences. We have first of all to accurately describe the phenomenon.
d) The transcendental reduction: For existential phenomenologists, this amounts to a specific effort to rebut positivism and the natural scientific programme.
e) Natural attitude: Man, in a state of society takes all measure of things for granted as real and concrete.
f) The trajectory of the phenomenological school represents one reaction to the growth in explanatory power and the social importance given to the natural sciences:

There is a constant tension within many areas of sociology and allied professions between positivist and social constructionist understandings of social phenomena and the human condition which we believe phenomenological description and transcendental reduction allows us to sidestep to some degree as:

> "Phenomenology does not study the what of our experience but the experience of the what – the experience of the intentional object,

> thing, entity, event as it appears to consciousness.” (Van Manen, 2014, p.91)

It is less important then, to focus on what service users have experienced or are experiencing and more important to understand and value what meaning they make of it. Social Work often takes an investigative stance in child protection work, trying to uncover the truth of a situation, which is often unreachable for our only witnesses to that truth are people who are telling us their own accounts of their lives. These are imbued with the meaning and value they bring to it. It is their understandings that will inform their abilities to survive or thrive and which will inform their future actions. When social workers try to impose an external meaning to their experiences all we do is devalue those meanings and rob them of agency. An important device within phenomenology then is the *epoché* (bracketing) which is a suspension of the naïve belief in the natural attitude. The phenomenologist attempts to put the real world of objects, instruments, values and people between brackets and to put them ‘out of play’ (Roche, 1973). According to Roche, Schutz (1962) described the natural attitude as a ‘suspension of doubt’ and the *epoché* as a ‘suspension of belief’.

Use of the *epoché* allows the social worker to suspend their prior assumptions about what might have happened, what might be the barriers or oppressions that service users face and what we believe the answers to be. This natural standpoint is the point of view that all of us cannot but adopt in the course of our everyday lives. The acceptance of certain things as real and indubitable in order to live and act in everyday life includes social facts as well as physical facts. Bracketing away all these prior assumptions and attitudes allows us to privilege the stance of the service user and to get a glimpse into their being-in-the-world.

The notion of being-in-the-world plays its most prominent role in the thinking of Heidegger (1953) and Merleau-Ponty (2002), which help to break with modern divisions that lead to the most difficult problems of a philosophy of action. Both philosophers see the human as purposefully acting in the world. What Heidegger calls *Dasein*¸ offers a radical rethinking of the human self. *Dasein* in its most basic sense attempts to think of the human as simply there, existing in a world. *Dasein* is also a questioning being and what makes *Dasein* distinctive is its ability to question its own existence, its own projects and its own place in a historical world. In addition, Heidegger through the course of *Being and Time* attempts to unveil the different modalities of being human. Primarily, Dasein is a temporal being, embedded within a specific history, coming from somewhere and going somewhere, at an intersection of past, present and future. Because the human *is* essentially a temporal and transient being, this firstly reveals the contingency and specific historicity of the human being. Additionally, this contingency reveals further insights

for Heidegger, into what makes a human being what they are and can be. Because time is the ultimate horizon of our being, it ultimately means that we are the beings which pass, and therefore death is of fundamental concern. As such, death is a phenomenon of life for Heidegger (Kominkiewicz, 2006; Jirasek & Veselesky, 2013). Because death haunts life as such, it means that anxiety is also a principle mode of our existing in a world. Anxiety ought not necessarily be considered in a purely negative sense or as a form of psychological disturbance. Instead, anxiety reveals the contingency of being human. Certainly, anxiety reveals the precarious nature of life, but it also reveals the possibilities that are open to *Dasein.* Anxiety, for our purposes, reveals the human as a being at risk, and at the same time a being with the capacity to confront the different ways risk might manifest itself.

Heidegger suggests that in addition to anxiety there a number of fundamental moods (*Stimmung*) which constitute *Dasein.* According to Heidegger, these moods or atmospheres disclose the world to us as meaningful. For example, mood discloses our thrownness (*Geworfenheit*), or the idea that we inhabit a particular environment. Mood discloses futural possibilities which we project towards and for which we are inherently concerned or have care for (*Sorge*). All of our fundamental moods take place in a social atmosphere, what Heidegger calls *befindlichkeit* (attunement) which is the general precondition for any tasks or activities that we carry out. This is to say, that we find ourselves situated or attuned to the world in a way that is meaningful. For our purposes, Heidegger's typology of moods offers us an exceptionally rich way of thinking about how social workers interact with the world of service users. Being able to have a sense of mood, of the totality of the environment of a service user, we argue offers a vital platform through which we can gain sense of the ways service users belong to a world. In terms of caring and concernful relations that emerge in relation to service users this offers an important distinction to psychological and objective models. If we consider the moods of the service user not as naturalized or objective, i.e. as detached and 'out there' in the external world, nor if we consider the service user in a subjective psychological sense, as merely holding a 'state-of-mind' that is there to be fixed, but instead through discerning that which is both pre-objective and pre-subjective, namely the sense of being part of a world, being alienated from a world, having a stake in a world. To think of service users in a dispositional sense, or being-affected in innumerable ways, will allow the social worker to gain an illuminated sense of who they are engaging with, what matters to said individuals, as well as a sense of the possibilities that are latent in their current situation. (Kominkiewicz, 2006; Jirasek & Veselesky, 2013).

Such an approach we argue considers the service-user neither as an object that can be viewed from a detached and neutral point of view, nor as someone that is purely self-inaugurated with sole responsibility for their

own agency. Furthermore, the upshot of this method, is that it is also enriching for the social worker, who can gain a sophisticated sense of various practical meanings and projects available to a service user. Also, the social worker can now see they belong to a relatively proximate significant world, where there are innumerable practical meanings with which to engage the service user, as well as sharing and being practically immersed in the various possibilities that lay open.

Ultimately, what phenomenology recognizes is that the social worker also is a being-in-the-world and is not a dispassionate actor able to step aside and objectively understand the lived experiences of others. Roche (1973, p.30) describes Heidegger's phenomenology as preliminary to ontology and, as such, hermeneutic. That is, it has to understand and interpret human existence as it is, as 'Dasein'. The philosopher and social worker can only understand phenomena from their own being-in-the-world. Stanford (2011, p.1528) similarly argues that we need to question the assumptions, feeling and motivations that contribute to the meanings we ascribe to these 'embodied conceptualisations of risk.'

Embodied Social Work Practice

In addition to the rich register of phenomenological concepts which we can take from Heidegger, we also argue that the role of embodiment is an essential feature of the relation between social worker and service user. Embodiment is a phenomenological concept that has most famously and extensively been articulated by Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The basic idea for Merleau-Ponty is that the body is active and dynamic as well as a rich repository of meaning. Our lived experience is an embodied one.

Generally, Merleau-Ponty (2002) critiques the dominant philosophical trends of what he calls 'intellectualism' (rationalism) and empiricism. Both provide very limited accounts of how we might understand human beings as they exist in the world. Intellectualism, Merleau-Ponty argues, over-emphasizes the conceptual content of our experience, and empiricism over-emphasizes 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. Merleau-Ponty (1964, p.138) says as much: "Our science and our philosophy are two faithful and unfaithful offshoots of Cartesianism, two monsters born of its dismemberment."

Instead, Merleau-Ponty wants to theorize an enriched account of perceptual experience with the body playing the most significant role. The most basic reason for this argument, for Merleau-Ponty, is that on a very primordial and visceral level what we are is constituted from space, depth

and motility. We cannot be aware, we cannot think, we cannot judge or imagine without involving the body. While this may seem obvious, for Merleau-Ponty the stake of such an insight is fundamentally overlooked. If the human body by necessity takes up space, and has depth, then we must do more than simply think of the body as an inert and static object. Instead, the body is actively dynamic for Merleau-Ponty. To have consciousness, to be aware is to 'think body' from start to finish. The body is responsive, embedded, a source of historical and sedimented meaning. It is not neutral nor abstract. We cannot conceive of the body in an abstract or neutral way decoupled from the space and world which it inhabits. Thus, to exist is to exist as an embodied being-in-the-world.

As well as taking up space and depth, the body is also characterized by motility. For Merleau-Ponty, the body is not passive, instead it is active, existing within certain constraints and limitations, but essentially also responding and reaching out to the world in which it is enmeshed. The body adapts to the spaces, environments, and different possibilities. What is significant about this for our purposes is that we consider it necessary to supplement Heidegger's analysis of moods with Merleau-Ponty's analysis of embodiment. Incorporating an understanding of embodiment, is vital for understanding the roles of both social worker and service user. Bringing embodiment into the frame of reference, allows the discourse of social work to consider body in its most visceral and existential nature as one of possibility, movement *as well* as habitual disposition. In this way, we can account for social work as a visceral phenomenon rather than an abstract one, which invariably leads to an enhanced and nuanced account of how the relation between social worker and service user is a question of engrained embodiment, incorporating pragmatic issues such as fatigue, the lived experience of risk, as well as phenomenological questions about possibilities of mortality and survival. Hence, it is our position, that a phenomenology of survival surrounding issues of life and death, and the nature of meaning, are essential to bring to the practice of social work.

Ferguson (2010, p.1108) describes the adventure of social work as 'characterised by feelings of excitement, dread, fear, often extreme anxiety, thrill and adrenaline rushes' which are part of the routine experience of social work and often referred to as the 'buzz'. He also describes practitioners' bodies as being physically put at risk as the environment itself is used against them, making their job harder and even possibly causing them harm. He draws upon Merleau-Ponty's (2002, p.235) description of the body as the very actuality of the phenomenon of expression and the greatest instrument of comprehension. Social Workers often experience 'disgust' at home conditions that produce a direct threat to their own physical safety and may not take appropriate action to protect children due to this physical experience and the need to find their own safety (Ferguson, 2010). He describes a catalogue of threats to the

very bodies of social workers but also describes the thrill from feeling that you have made a difference to people's lives and relieved suffering.

> "Our own body is in the world as the heart is in the organism: it keeps the visible spectacle constantly alive, it breathes life into it and sustains it inwardly, and with it forms a system" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.235)

As we can see, there is no duality in Merleau-Ponty. Here he is saying that the individual body isn't distinct from the outside world but is a contributing part of it. Nor is there a duality between mind and body for Merleau-Ponty was particularly influenced by Gabriel Marcel's *Metaphysical Journal (1927)* and especially his claim that I do not so much *have* a body as that "I *am* my body" (*je suis mon corps*). (cited in Moran, 2000, p.406)

Because we are inextricably in the world, Merleau-Ponty argues that we are unable to separate it objectively from our experience of it (Merleau-Ponty, 2002) Therefore "all consciousness is consciousness of something" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.6). This seats Merleau-Ponty clearly in the tradition of Husserl and Heidegger through the clarity that this *directedness* brings to philosophical thought. Recognising that we aren't a free-floating consciousness disconnectedly grappling with understanding and meaning, but that we are corporeal beings situated temporally in a world that we are involved with, brings purpose. We don't argue for *purpose* in any teleological sense that we are heading towards any pre-existing *truth* but for purpose that our involvement in the world *matters*. This relates back to Heidegger's point that Dasein has *care* for the world.

Inherent in this position is a critique of any *dualisms* of soul/body, mind/body, consciousness/body. We would argue that we cannot treat the body as an object for consciousness as it is the very interface between consciousness and the world and therefore involved in both. Reason does not sit on top of physical, sensory experience. "Rationality itself is imbued with sensibility and vice versa" (Moran, 2000, p.423). Merleau-Ponty extends this discussion by drawing upon Sartre's account of how the body is everywhere in one's experience of the world.

> "That is why my body always extends across the tool which it utilises: it is at the end of the cane on which we lean and against the earth, it is at the end of the telescope which shows me the stars; it is on the chair, in the whole house, for it is my adaptation to these tools." (Sartre, 1958: *Being and Nothingness* cited in Moran, 2000, p.424)

Merleau-Ponty developed this theme by arguing that we do not just take up space, we inhabit it and relate to it "like a hand to an instrument" (cited in Moran, 2000, p.424). We see here how Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger

separate in thinking about tools. For Heidegger, they were either ‘ready to hand’ or ‘present at hand’. For Merleau-Ponty, the hand and the tool form an alliance that makes the tool useful or not. The hammer may be the right weight to hammer in the nail but if the hand that wields it is too heavy or too light problems can emerge. The user requires ‘feel’ and dexterity that responds to feeling the responsiveness of the nail.

Similarly, for the use of ‘risk’ in social work. One of us has argued previously (Smeeton, 2018) that risk is in itself ‘obstinate’ in the Heideggerian sense of the word. It inhibits good practice. However, we must also take into account that at the end of that tool is a person, which is the social worker wielding it. They ultimately take responsibility for their practice and their decision making, how much emphasis they put on which ‘risk factors’ based on their own embodied knowledge of the world and their physical and emotional encounter with the service users with whom they are working. Roche (1973, p.28) describes Merleau-Ponty’s concept of ‘être au monde’ or ‘being-in-the-midst-of-the-world’ by stating; “Man as we know him is the possessor of manual and linguistic skills of which only his embodiment as an organic entity, and only his co-existence with other persons could make any sense.” Therefore, the social worker is not a passive objective machine employing the tools of the state:

> “But the system of experience is not arrayed before me as if we were a god, it is lived by me from a certain point of view; I am not the spectator, I am involved, and it is my involvement in a point of view which makes possible both the finite-ness of my perception and its opening out upon the complete world as a horizon of perception.” (Merleau-Ponty 2002, p.354)

It is the individual social worker who encounters the world of the service user and tries to make sense not only of the service user’s meanings but their own perceptions.

> “We make perception out of things perceived. And since perceived things themselves are obviously accessible only through perception, we end by understanding neither. We are caught up in the world and we do not succeed in extricating ourselves from it in order to achieve consciousness of the world. If we did we should see that quality is never experienced immediately, and that all consciousness is consciousness of something.” (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.5-6)

According to Delancey (2009) Merleau-Ponty’s use of ‘perception’ is specifically related to our experience of the world pre-theoretically – that is the experience of being-in-the-world. Perception and intentionality, Delancey argues, are essentially related to action: we perceive things not in terms of simply a construction of sense data but as opportunities for action.

What we can take from this for the social worker in practice, is that *epoché* offers social workers the ability to suspend (bracket) their beliefs in the natural attitude so they aren't relying on 'common sense' but are able to see as true a picture of the services users' lived experience as possible. According to Roche (1973) Merleau-Ponty argued that the *epoché* required a flight from natural science's conception of the world so the phenomenology can investigate lived experience which for Merleau-Ponty was an investigation of perception or rather the world as perceived. The *epoché* helps us to see the ordinary as strange and in need of some explanation. The social worker needs to understand themselves in that context too, paying attention to the fears they have, the bodily reactions to physical threat and the smells and sounds in the environment as well as the brute force of survival in many instances. Using *epoché* gives space to question the natural assumptions that arise and to test out the experience of rationality. While philosophy often focuses on rational thought, concepts and language, what is ignored according to Merleau-Ponty (Moran, 2000, p.418) is the "experience of rationality" arising from the "pre-predictive life of consciousness" which is the experience of a being with a body, of having a body caught up in risk infused situations along with the experience of possibilities within those situations. Here our bodies and the specific information of the sense organs reveal the world for us in a very special way. His argument here is that our whole understanding of the world is grounded in our corporeal nature. We have to treat the human subject therefore as an "irresolvable consciousness which is wholly present in every one of its manifestations" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p.120)

What we have to do as social workers though is to find meaning in this messy, murky milieu where we are trying to strike the balance to enable people to make their own free choices and stepping-in in order to protect. Merleau-Ponty believes that we need to take human freedom into account but believes 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. He adapts Sartre's existential statement that "we are condemned to be free" (cited in Moran: 2000, p.420) to "we are condemned to meaning" (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. *xxiii*).

Applying these ideas of *epoché* and *embodiment* to the social worker's lived experience of child protection practice within risk saturated environments, leads us to a discussion about how and why social workers continue to practice and the fragility of *dasein* as a practitioner. We postulate that child protection social work has much in common with the risk taking of extreme sports.

Social Work as Extreme Sport

> "The decision-making in skydiving is relatively simple. It is impossible to jump a little out of the plane. Either one jumps or one does not. And when one has made the jump there is no way back. Skydiving is irreversible and one has to make fast decisions. Things happen very fast." (Breivik, 2011, p.325)

Of course, child protection social work is *not* a sport. It is the interface between the state and very vulnerable people who are often living difficult lives with complex challenges and few resources. There is no scoring system for protecting children (although many of the neo-liberal performance management systems might tend in that direction). It is certainly not a profession that people enter for fun or to get fit. It is probably the antithesis to those goals. So why do social workers do it and why do some of them stay in it? The stress levels and burnout rates are extremely high (Cooper, 2015). In its evidence to the House of Commons Education Select Committee, Cornwall Council wrote:

> "The statement that non-defined 'failure will not be tolerated' only adds to the high anxiety experienced by frontline social workers, which in turn leads to defensive practice. Defensive practice only serves to reduce the effectiveness of social work. It also adds a barrier to recruitment and retention, especially as many operate in fear that they will be blamed (and punished) for systemic failings or the failings of others." (6th July 2016)

The problems in retention that follow practice in high anxiety meant that in 2015 there was a vacancy rate of 17% and that the average children & families social work career in the UK lasts less than eight years compared to 16 for a nurse and 25 for a doctor. (Select Committee, 6th July 2016). As Littlechild (2008, p.672) successfully argued, "…it is necessary to examine the risks of risk assessments" due to their inducement of fearful perceptions in social workers concerned about the unrealistic promise that risk can be eliminated; that they will be blamed if they get it wrong; and from the direct violence or threats of violence from service users. Anxiety about mechanistic risk assessment has in fact increased social work fears. Smith, Nursten & McMahon (2004) in their extensive study of the effects of fear in social workers reported the full range of physiological and cognitive effects related to the adrenaline rush of fear, tummy cramps, increased heart rate, dry mouth, feeling sick. These fears related to a variety of situations from actual attacks and direct threats from service users to fear of colleagues' responses to perceived failures. Their study of social workers only included those still in work and is missing accounts from those who left the profession due to their anxieties and fears.

Stanford (2010, 2011), in considering how ideas of risk are constituted and integrated into social workers interventions, found that risk operated as an embodied concept for practitioners and was spoken of as attached to

characters rather than contexts. This very useful framework of presenting both social workers' and service users' 'risk identities' as either 'a risk' or 'at risk' allows Stanford to form a subtle analysis of social workers' fears. She describes them as fearing negative judgments of their practice, fearing physical violence from service users and fearing that they may cause harm to clients through being ineffective. The realisation that social workers often ascribe themselves and service users simultaneously 'a risk' and 'at risk' identities reveals the complex dynamics of how risk operates, particularly when social workers are having to make complex moral judgments about which identities they need to prioritise within each interaction. Stanford's study is peppered with examples of how social workers recognise risk and overcome their fears in order to selflessly take a stand for their clients and to do good. As one of her participants illustrates:

> "The risk to the client, which to me is the moral consideration, overrode the other one, the systematic or personal risk. So to me that was the right thing to do. Yes. It just overrode it." (Stanford, 2010, p.1075)

Stanford (2010, p.1077) concludes that risk taking in the face of fear and feeling unsafe at work was a common feature of her participants' accounts and that their capacity to act resolutely with purpose as agents of change involved taking risks which laid bare their personal and professional vulnerabilities.

Ferguson's (1997, 2010, 2014) extensive and impressive body of work about embodied social work practice gives many insights into the lived experience of child protection social workers with some nods to Merleau-Ponty but without ever fully theorizing from that position. However, it is interesting that he develops a narrative of child protection social work as an 'adventure' often referred to as the 'buzz'" (Ferguson, 2011, p.47). One of his participants described getting a high from practice. Ferguson (2011, p.48) self-reports about his learning from previous practice with a service user who threatened violence as being an '…investment in a dangerous kind of macho social work, where getting in at any cost…became a kind of victory not only for needing to see the children and the home, but something to boost my masculine pride".

We propose that as Ferguson indicated above, there is a 'buzz' to child protection social work that draws on the adrenalin rush of making very difficult, life-changing decisions in an environment of high risk to the self and others. Decision making becomes an embodied experience of risk-taking by professionals. While the decision-making in sky-diving is relatively simple the decision-making in child protection social work is not. There are lots of complex, dynamic factors to take into account. However, once decisions are made and actions taken, they can't be unmade. At the

extreme end one either takes a child away from its parents or leaves them at home. On very rare occasions when children are left at home they may die at the hands of their carers, as with Victoria Climbie or Peter Connolly. The social work decision in that situation is completely irreversible and the consequences terrible for all. If one takes a child away, there may be points within the early stages that parents can be helped to change things around and the child returned to their care. However, the separation has long lasting effects on all concerned. We cannot go back to a position where that decision was never made. It will cause an evanescent chain that will change the way that the child, the birth parents and the social worker perceive the world. If the child is placed for adoption the decision again is irreversible. The child cannot go back. These decisions do not usually have to be taken immediately but they are life changing. Once one has decided to jump one cannot jump a little. There is no phenomenological literature relating to this, but there is one relating to the similarly adrenalin fuelled activities involved in extreme sports such as snowboarding (Loland, 2007), and even more risk sports where the extreme situation of facing danger and possible death makes deep existential structures visible in a peculiar and salient way (Jirasek, 2007; Breivik, 2010). The phenomenology of risk sport places the main aspect of risk in the specific interaction between person, activity and arena, which mirrors the descriptions of social work made by Ferguson above.

In his discussion of risk sport, Brymer (2010) argues that risk is a culturally constructed phenomenon stemming from modern society's deep-seated aversion for, and obsessive desire to be 'liberated' from, uncertainty. Risk, he argues, was initially a construct used to understand outcome probability and magnitude in gambling but as modern society has become fixated with safety, risk has gradually become a negative descriptor synonymous with the unacceptable face of danger and society's primary preoccupation about 'rendering it measurable and controllable'. Government policy has become so preoccupied with risk reduction that activities not immediately accepted by the majority are instantly labelled undesirable. Risk sports face this stigma…and so does social work.

> "Our evidence suggested the fear of blame within children and families social work is counter-productive to the retention of social workers". (Select Committee, 6th July 2016)

Conclusions.

We have argued that there is a fight for social work's knowledge base between the micro level of psychology and the macro level of sociology that has pulled social work's focus away from our interactions with our service users. We have therefore argued as per Heidegger that we should regard psychology and sociology as secondary phenomena, particular

ways of being, derivative from and irretrievably dependent upon other, more everyday ways of being. The battle ground for this fight has been the 'risk society' so we have explored how that pre-occupation with risk and search for certainty has tried to lull us into dependence upon disembodied practice rooted in objective ways of knowing.

We have therefore tried to work through how embodiment changes social work practice towards a risk fuelled profession dealing with high levels of anxiety and burn out rates more akin to a risk sport than measured, caring interventions aimed towards supporting families. We have argued that phenomenology may provide a useful framework for understanding not only the lived experiences of service users but also embodied social work practice and the ways that fear and anxiety can impact upon decision-making in child protection contexts.

Research Ethics:
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