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"A Murky Business": A phenomenological ontology of risk in child protection social work

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Introduction:

Often in social work we reify risk by constructing it as a monster (Featherstone et al, 2016) that needs feeding data and the social work task becomes satiating this monster with a regular diet of reporting. However, we rarely fully describe this monster – does it have fangs, how sharp are its claws? My argument is that risk isn't the monster itself but a fog that shrouds us and, in that fog, we allow our imaginations to build a beast to rail against. By returning 'to the things in themselves' (Husserl, cited in Roche, 1973:27) I

hope to describe it and consider its usefulness or otherwise in relation to the humane task of keeping children safe.

Risk is a murky business. It sits like a fog on the hills that we drive across, creating a persistent state of anxiety about what lies around the corner. Yet it isn't the fog that the car is going to crash into but the oncoming lorry or the sheep in the middle of the road. What we fear isn't the fog itself which merely makes us anxious about the potential for something to go wrong at some point in time. This may heighten our awareness of potential hazards and it may cause us to drive more slowly. However, if we are late for work it may not. We chance it and live with the anxiety that it causes us leading to nausea and stress or an adrenalin buzz. What we ought to do is slow down and spend more time looking for the hazards that may be around the corner. What we do is try to arrive in time in a state of anxiety not seeing the things that may cause harm.

In severe danger of taking the analogy too far, this paper is an attempt to turn the fog lights on. I intend to shine a bright light on 'risk' and see what it is made of and try to understand what its impact is upon child protection social work practice in the UK using a phenomenological approach. For…

> *"…a phenomenology, properly carried through is the truly universal ontology, as over against the only illusory all-embracing ontology in positivity – and precisely for this reason it overcomes the dogmatic one-sidedness and hence unintelligibility of the latter, while at the same time it comprises within itself the truly legitimate content [of an ontology in positivity] as grounded originally in intentional constitution" (Husserl, cited in Welton, 1999:333)*

I have previously attempted a phenomenological exploration of forms of knowledge in child protection practice (Smeeton, 2015), which in the end looked more like an epistemology of child protection than a phenomenology in the Husserlian sense. In order to reseat myself back into this phenomenological tradition I intend to remind myself of Heidegger's aversion to epistemology which *'…continually sharpens the knife but never gets round to cutting'* (Heidegger, cited in Inwood, 1997) and to initially focus on the *ontology* of risk, before considering the impact of risk on the lived experiences of the actors in the performance of child protection social work; i.e. children, their parents, social workers, the social work agency and wider society.

I will also draw upon sociological perspectives taken mainly from Beck's descriptions (1992 and 2007) of the risk society and I will set out some definitions to align the reader to the current context of child protection social

work and how risk features there. We also need to be clear about the different ways to think about what is happening to children and the constituent factors, that seem to have been wrapped up into the neat little package of 'risk' so I will spend some time unwrapping this and looking at the separate elements of 'harms', 'hazards' and 'needs', rather than 'risk' which is in fact simply a calculation of the possibility for a hazard to cause harm.

I also intend to consider how risk is written about and how it features in the academic social work literature primarily but also in the wider discourses about child protection that permeate society – especially following child death tragedies for these litter the social work landscape with pitfalls for practice. I will posit an argument that the profession is engaged in a process of risk reification which is problematic and shrouds out understanding and meaning. Through risk reification the probability of harm becomes the object that falls under our gaze rather than the harm itself or the potential hazards that might cause the harm. We speak of families where there is a lot of risk or social workers carrying too much risk. How do we carry too much risk? Can we physically or cognitively hold a possibility? Our professional knowledge seems to have become that of managing risk rather than understanding what contributes to hazards or harm. Have we therefore developed as experts in the avoidance of likelihood?

My tacit understanding is that risk is approached as if it is a *thing* that exists in the world and the job of the social worker is to understand and deal with this *thing* in order to keep children safe. The paper therefore seeks to explore the *thingness* of risk drawing upon Heidegger's approaches to ontology in 'Being and Time' (1953). In doing so I hope to pick up Husserl's notion of phenomenology as being the way to *do* ontology.

I will attempt to discuss the usefulness of risk as a construct as either *present-to-hand* or *ready-to-hand* using Heidegger. I will expand on Heidegger's analysis of whether risk is a *conspicuous, obtrusive* or *obstinate* construct within child protection social work. I will then go on to consider who experiences risk and how does this experience of risk affect the life worlds of participants? I will argue that risk isn't experienced by children but is in fact experienced by the professionals involved in making decisions.

'Groping About' for risk in social work

> "The history of philosophy bears witness how, with regard to the horizon essentially necessary for them and to the assurance of that horizon, all ontological interpretations are more like a groping about than an inquiry clear in its method." (Heidegger, 1988: 322)

Broadhurst (2009) argues that 'Third Way' politics gave rise to the 'risk paradigm' that pervaded the Blair government and social problems conceptualised in terms of individuals, families, communities and populations deemed to be at risk with interventions targeted to prevent those risks. She argues that while the focus on risk aims at increasing consistency and rigour in assessment this focus can conflate and obscure need as well as constraining and undermining professionalism through technicalising decision-making.

What strikes me most in my conversations with social workers about risk is the lack of a clear understanding about what they mean by it and this is often reflected in the literature by an almost implicit nod to indicate that we all inherently share an understanding. I include here some examples about how social work is written about as indicative of the problem I am trying to address but without indicating a broader critique of the authors' work.

Preston-Shoot (2014) makes 60 references to risk in a book with only 186 pages but never defines what he means by it. This is typical of a profession that is working on a shorthand assumption that we all understand and agree the construct of risk where in fact nothing could be further from the truth. Webb (2006:34) offers a loose definition of risk as:

> "…the recognition and assessment of the uncertainty as to what to do, with risk judgement being the degree of distance a course of action may be at from certain success. The concept of risk thus provides the basis for understanding the relation between judgment and uncertainty."

Ferguson (2010) avoids really defining risk as such, even while making it a central feature of his work, other than to talk about practitioners experiencing risks and taking risks. Interestingly, he says that:

> "…risk in social work must be understood as not just being about danger and fear of blame for things going wrong. Notions of risk need to be recast in the positive terms of opportunity, courage, resilience, skill and creativity, thus making evident some of the core virtues that social workers enact day in day out" (2010: 1112-13)

He is thus indicating that risk is currently being thought about as being only about danger and fear of blame rather than having any utilitarian value. He concludes that the notions of adventure, atmosphere, movement and blocked movement, flow and flux are "useful metaphors for capturing the contingent, 'liquid' and unpredictable nature of risk in child protection" (Ferguson, 2010: 1113). Ferguson also recognises that the heightened awareness of risks, dangers and hazards create systemic conditions that keep social workers away from directly engaging with children and families and chain them to their

desktop computers. “The risky kind of things social workers have to do on the streets and in the homes of difficult service users can make the office and even the most demanding computerised case recording systems seem very attractive indeed.” (2010:1114) This is also how organisations create defences against anxiety.

Holland (2004) argues that risk is not a concrete concept but is socially constructed. She argues that it cannot be a technical calculation but a way of thinking rather than a *thing* or set of realities. Social workers then have to construct a view on how risky an individual situation is. My tendency to agree with her will be later compromised by my arguments for the *thingness* of risk using Heidegger’s ontology but I certainly agree with her argument linking risk management to accountability and the risk to the professional or organisation of being sued.

Holt (2014: 54) says that social workers need to be able to step back and be “clear about risk”, but then assumes the procedural approach to risk typical of social work through her interpretation of the law in stating that “where there is risk to the life of a child or a likelihood of serious harm, local authority social workers…should use their statutory powers to act quickly to secure the immediate safety of the child.” For the first time in this piece we see ‘risk’ and ‘likelihood’ used as if they are synonyms. Some dictionary definitions of risk

(e.g. Shorter Oxford English) include notions of dangerousness but also talk about risk as *chance, possibility* or *likelihood*. Yet it is the linkages between *risk, hazard, harm* that I would like to spend a little time thinking about for I believe that my opening stance that risk throws a fog on our thinking which leads to a state of anxiety rests on this discussion.

I would like to argue that we should think of a *hazard* as something that can cause *harm*; e.g. particular situations or behaviours of carers and children that have potential to cause harm to a child: a *risk* is the *likelihood* that any *hazard* will actually cause somebody *harm*; or the likelihood that the child will be exposed to the hazard and that exposure will cause harm. Risk and hazard shouldn't be synonyms and nor should risk and likelihood. More importantly - *Harm* is what the child may experience and is the thing that we should be trying to reduce. *Risk* is what the professionals experience for that is their pre-occupation. It deflects attention away from the concern for the child to a concern for one's own professional standing and the organisation's liabilities. This process of risk reification has created a situation where the likelihood becomes the object that falls under our gaze rather than the harm itself or the potential hazards that might cause the harm. Without understanding the hazards or the harm we are left generally aware that there is risk but not able to discuss what we mean by that or qualify it with any certainty thus leaving us in a state of anxiety. Delanty (1999 cited in Webb 2006:34) similarly

describes risks within reflexive modernity as abstract and de-personalised and therefore not immediately observable. Risks are contrasted to dangers and natural hazards in that they are made by society; risks, he asserts, cannot be limited and are therefore not insurable or compensatable.

In focusing on risk we also take our gaze away from *needs* and *strengths* and often fail to recognize *resilience*, ie. the qualities within the family environment or developing child that mitigate against potential hazards resulting in actual harm. However, developmental growth is dependent upon taking risks and success involves risking failure. I ask: has our knowledge base become that of managing risk rather than understanding what contributes to hazards or harm? Is risk therefore a useful construct?

This imprecision in language is contributing to our high anxiety levels and our low confidence in accurate prediction. What do we mean when we say for example that “there is a lot of risk”, or that “there is a high level of risk”? Both of these statements could mean that there is a high likelihood that one hazard may cause a small amount of harm. However, they may also mean that there are lots of potential hazards and the resulting harm to the child may be severe or even fatal.

Heidegger’s Phenomenology.

> "There is no such thing as *the one* phenomenology, and if there could be such a thing it would never become anything like a philosophical technique. For implicit in the essential nature of all genuine method as a path toward the disclosure of objects is the tendency to order itself always toward that which it discloses." (Heidegger, 1988: 328)

Heidegger is a tricky philosopher to use to look at social work due to his associations with the Nazi party. In using some of Heidegger's philosophy I am in no way accepting or excusing his abhorrent political stance but nor will I attempt to disentangle his philosophy from his politics within this paper. However, I do want to recognise the possibility that "…Heidegger's philosophy might be only a sublimated philosophical version, …, of the political or ethical principles which determined the philosopher's support for Nazism." (Bourdieu, 1991: 4) and so approach its use with caution. Yet I reject the view that *all* ideas are necessarily tainted by the thinker's historically situated political views and, cautiously, attempt to cherry-pick some elements that I think may shed light on a specific current situation, which should by no means indicate that I accept the total work or any of the uses to which it may have been put. As Bourdieu (1991:1) also acknowledges, "There are doubtless few intellectual systems more profoundly rooted and dated by their times than… the 'pure philosophy' of Heidegger." If we are to accept at its most basic,

Heidegger's description of *Dasein* as *being-in-the-world* then we have to recognise and note very strongly that the *world* in which Heidegger was *being* was Nazi Germany.

Heidegger's thought features rarely in the social work literature and where it does there is a tendency for it to be focused around authenticity as *being-toward death* (Jirásek & Veselsky, 2013; Kominkiewicz, 2006). This fundamental ontology of Heidegger's argues that only man knows and cares about his own mortality and therefore can be the only creature said to have being in the world or *Dasein.* Knowing and accepting one's mortality enables you to choose what you will do with Dasein and therefore leads to the possibility of authenticity. Other things or creatures simply exist.

Heidegger (1953) coined human *being* as *Dasein.* In German, the word is made up of the words *sein* (being) and *da* (there). So, the literal translation is 'there being' or, a more Anglophone friendly, 'being there'. We see immediately that for Heidegger, to be human is to be situated. Moran, (2000:233) states that "The fundamental nature of Dasein is always to be in a world. World here means a context, an environment, a set of references and assignments within which any meaning is located." I think his use of the word 'nature' here is misplaced as that might suggest a form of being that has innate essential properties that my reading of Heidegger would argue against. Inwood

(1997:19) suggests that Dasein is not a substance with an essential nature and properties and also that its potentiality or possibility is prior to its actuality. Dasein is not a definite actual thing but the *possibility* of various ways of being. According to Inwood, Heidegger accepts that there are limitations put on Dasein due to circumstances "Existentiality is always determined by facticity" (Heidegger, 1953;192 cited in Inwood, 1997) but these circumstances and conditions are not simply 'present-at-hand properties'. I can respond to them in various ways. As a bald person, I may refuse to accept that I am bald and opt for the comb-over; I might let it drive me to despair, I might wear a wig or celebrate my baldness with a daily polish.

Heidegger's work is often considered morbid and indeed Arendt's emphasis on *natality* rather than *mortality* seems to offer more hope and belief in the possibilities of life (Smeeton, 2015). However, I think in stressing knowledge of the ultimate end point allows people freedom to make choices in how they get there and brings significance to existence. According to Moran (2000: 238) "Dasein is the specific mode of being of humans, emphasising its individuality and its role in the disclosure of Being. Dasein does not just occur factually like rocks and trees; it's Being is an *issue* for it." Fundamentally therefore what is stressed in Being and Time is that humans *care.* For them to care, fully, they must accept that their being is in a world that is populated by other humans

and by other things. I think this is summed up by Charles Taylor in the excellent 2010 Ruspoli film "Being in the World":

> "The really important ends of human life are only perceptible if you let yourself be within the human situation totally" - Charles Taylor (in Ruspoli, 2010)

Heidegger's fundamental analysis of Dasein is to show up the structure of being in the world, being with things and with others in such a way that its whole existence is structured by care. "As Heidegger puts it, the existential meaning of dasein is *care*." (Moran, 2000:238) What we are able to see in Heidegger then is that Dasein is an existentially different way of being because human beings care about the quality of their existence and its relationship with others and the world. Humans are not simply 'there'. Their existence and the existence of others is significant to them.

Heidegger also views *Dasein* as an active mode of being. According to Inwood (1997:39) "Man is not a passive creature, roused to activity only by external stimuli; he is constantly up to something." This chimes with my theme that one of the dangers of social work's preoccupation with risk is that it often attempts to describe families as essential and fixed and therefore capable of being objectively described from the outside. This is an attempt by social

workers to take themselves out of the world they are attempting to understand and to fail to realise that they are not describing passive creatures but lives that move on through people capable of bringing meaning to their own lives rather than have that meaning externally imposed. I also argue that a snapshot assessment of the state of a person's life at any one point in time is useless as they 'are constantly up to something'. That something may be positive or negative but it is certainly dynamic. The social work task therefore might be better served by being *involved.* Involvement is more than assessing, setting a plan for families to change by a certain timescale and then reviewing their progress against it. Involvement is about recognizing their capacity for meaning and to *care* about what is happening and to commit to ways of being that are not negatively impacting upon poor outcomes for themselves or others, then being alongside them in the process. Social Work has to care.

> "Care is correlative to the significance of the world. Only if Dasein is care can it dwell in a significant world and only if it dwells in a significant world can Dasein be care." (Inwood 1997:52)

Heidegger's Ontology

Heidegger, according to Inwood (1997: 56), believed that ontology and phenomenology coincide, which echoes Husserl's position and Sartre's (1958)

phenomenological ontology. I will first of all look at what is meant by ontology before exploring Heidegger's approach to it and then applying that approach in examining the *thingness* of risk.

"No entity without identity" (Quine cited in Berto & Plebani 2015: 10)

If we understand ontology in the Quinean way as simply a quest to catalogue everything there is, then it can be seen as preliminary to metaphysics. One first writes down the inventory of reality before wondering about its nature, structure and fundamental features. However, many philosophers use ontology and metaphysics as synonyms and talk about ontology as more than cataloguing reality but as a study of the fundamental and general structures of reality. (Berto & Plebani 2015: 3-4).

According to Berto & Plebani (2015: 49) Heidegger's position was that Dasein's being was irreducibly distinct from the beings of things like animals, plants and artefacts to the extent that only Dasein can be said to *exist,* whereas other things can be said to *live* or that they plainly *are.* Risk then cannot be said to exist within this frame but we can still say that there *is* a something that we call risk. This paper will not take the discussion about ontological pluralism any further than that other than simply to acknowledge that there are opposing positions and that Heidegger's stance would be

considered by Quine as nonsense, dismissing it as a consequence of his doctrine that existence is expressed by quantification. I argue that risk is not quantifiable and as such could be argued to not therefore exist in Quine's logic. However, I will assert that risk is a phenomenon in the world that has an effect and as such will argue that it therefore has being even if that being is *conspicuous, obtrusive and obstinate*. I take here a Husserlian view that anything that presents itself to consciousness is potentially of interest to phenomenology, whether the object is real or imagined, empirically measurable or subjectively felt. (Van Manen 2014:94) Some things can be looked at ontologically even though they lack being (Berto & Plebani 2015: 3). Inwood (1997) suggests that before we deal with knowledge we need to consider the nature or the being of the object known.

The 'thingness' of risk

> "Beings nearest at hand can be met up with in taking care of things as unusable, as improperly adapted for their specific use. Tools turn out to be damaged, their material unsuitable. In any case *a useful thing* of some sort is at hand here. But we discover the unusability not by looking and ascertaining properties, but rather by paying attention to the dealings in which we use it. When we discover its unusability, the thing becomes

> conspicuous. *Conspicuousness* presents the thing at hand in a certain unhandiness." (Heidegger, 1953: 72)

I am 'groping about' for an ontological understanding of risk. It has no physical substance. Nor is not a construct that specifically contains abstract psychological activities such as 'dreaming' or 'thinking'. As we have seen it has few easily agreed definitions other than it is a possibility. Yet it does, as we have seen, have an effect on the world. It is used to inform decisions as to what action should be taken within families where there is concern about the safety of a child. It causes an effect of *anxiety* for individuals, entire professions and organisations which creates a *mood* for practice decisions. Can we therefore ascribe it the status of a thing? According to Roche, (1973:5) 'phenomenology…makes explicit its ontological commitments…that mental phenomena have as real and as unavoidable an existence…as have physical phenomena'. In Heideggarian ontology as argued I am sure we can then ascribe it the status of thing. We must therefore look at the usefulness of this thing for, as we have seen, it is poorly understood and seems to have a problematic effect on those who use it and, as Heidegger (1988:322) has also said, "Faulty interpretations, misunderstandings, put much more stubborn obstacles in the way of authentic cognition than a total ignorance."

Moran (2000:233) describes Heidegger's descriptions as giving priority to 'work-worlds' as a way of explicating our conception of 'being in the world'. Our initial contact with objects is in terms of their use and availability to us for certain assigned tasks which are generated by our interests. We engage with such objects according to their available being in relation to those tasks, what Heidegger calls *Zuhandensein,* 'readiness to hand' or what Dreyfus (Ruspoli, 2010) describes as 'availability'.

Heidegger's ontology takes account of the context or world that the object exists within and its purpose. He doesn't just see a table, he sees *the* table in *this* room which is for eating at or writing on. He doesn't see it first as a rectangular piece of wood with four legs on the north side of the room, but perhaps positioned as too far from the light where he wrote his first book. Similarly, a craftsman does not primarily see his hammer as an entity with certain geometrical and physical properties, but as something for hammering. It also cannot be seen in isolation from other objects – it is for hammering those nails into the shoes he is making. Objects that refer to each other constitute a realm of 'significance' if they are objects of use – or 'ready to hand' *(zuhanden)* as Heidegger puts it in contrast to entities that are merely 'present at hand' *(vorhanden).* We rarely engage with these things as objects in themselves, standing on their own and available for inspection. When we view them in a theoretical way we are on the road to science with a pure

interest in examining things in the way they are, bracketed from their connections and engagements with ourselves. The important features of the hammer are not if it weighs 1kg or is 6 inches long but if it is the right size for this craftsman to hammer these nails into these shoes. We make judgements based on usefulness and the appropriateness of things for the task. If we look at things simply in the theoretical mode they are *vorhandene* – 'present at hand' or simply 'there'. Heidegger (1953:68) described a useful thing as essentially "something in order to…".

> "What is peculiar to what is initially at hand is that it withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy. What every day dealings are initially busy with is not the tools themselves, but the work. What is to be produced in each case is what is primarily taken care of and is thus also what is at hand." (Heidegger, 1953:69)

Temporality is also always present. The craftsman while hammering implicitly looks ahead to the completed shoes he will have made and backwards to the time he learned the skills he needs to complete them. However, these things are not necessarily to mind. A craftsman engrossed in the task of hammering isn't thinking about the hammer or the nails, nor necessarily about the customers for whom he is making the shoes. These things are there for him and he is tacitly aware but they are inconspicuous and unobtrusive. He sees

them but they are not necessarily his focus as long as they are within this web of significance; the hammer is behaving as it always should, the nails are where he expects to find them, the leather is responding in the way it always should. They only become conspicuous if something goes awry, the head falls off the hammer or the leather runs out or the nails are not in their usual place when he reaches for them. Heidegger, according to Inwood (1997), thought that the craftsman can be as inconspicuous to himself as the things around him, barely aware of himself as an embodied agent let alone as an 'ego'. He may focus on himself if something goes wrong but rarely spends time noticing himself in the world. Heidegger felt that it was a persistent mistake of philosophers to make things too conspicuous: 'when direction on an object is taken as the basic structure of consciousness, being in the world is characterised far too explicitly and sharply'. (Heidegger, 2005: 1023-24).

So, risk has become conspicuous. Its usefulness is clearly in question. As we have seen from the social work literature, when social workers reach for it they find it doesn't quite do the job they need it to do. Or in its use it has other effects upon the task other than helping to understand the likelihood that a specific child may be harmed by a specific hazard. It purports, within child protection social work, to be a construct that should do only that yet it also brings anxiety about decision-making that causes that process to be shifted around within organisational management structures. Kemshall

(2010:1256; cited in Stanford, 2011) believes that social workers are likely to give into 'fatalism…trapped within risk-prone bureaucracies and technocratic responses to risk'. Stanford (2011) notes that the emotion of risk she identifies in her study is the emotion of *fear* which, she argues, interrupts even the most determined efforts towards progressive action. I would argue that there is also anxiety about the ethical considerations that its use brings when removing children from their birth families based upon value judgments that inevitably fall back on the perceived danger that certain human conditions may contain: e.g. the parents learning disability: mental ill health; living in poverty; their own care history. Stanford (2011) finds that risk, rather than being a calculable object is steeped in these ethical and moral issues that lead to risk decisions.

Risk is not in itself a tool but a construct that brings with it a variety of tools, such as assessment protocols, risk indicators, recidivism scales; yet it is claimed as a useful thing. So, let us look at the usefulness of risk.

"If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail" (Maslow, 1966)

We see that risk is not ready to hand as we cannot use it without theorising. Broadhurst et al (2010:1051) recognise that "the informal logics of risk that are so central to professional practice are under-emphasised and under-

theorised". We must therefore acknowledge that risk is *unready to hand*. Heidegger described things that are unready to hand as either: conspicuous – itself damaged; obtrusive – a part is missing; or obstinate – it is in itself a hindrance. This approach has been used in other phenomenologies relating to the professions (e.g. Carel, 2015)

I believe that what risk preoccupation has done is to take our gaze away from the lived experiences of those we claim to be helping. Helm (2011) argues that the child's lived experience isn't accurately and empathically represented in professional assessments due to contemporary policy and practice developments which focus on explicit analytical judgement and take less account of what children are actually saying. Risk is therefore obstinate in the Heideggarian sense in that it is actually hindering our ability to see things from the perspective of our primary client. Instead we focus on ourselves.

Ferguson (2010: 1101) argues "that understandings of risk need to be grounded much more in the lived experience of social work and what social workers actually do, where they do it and how they must use their (mobile) bodies and senses in doing so". His invocation here of Merleau-Ponty's view that the body is the greatest instrument of comprehension of the perceived world particularly through the senses, locates his work phenomenologically. However, this isn't fully explored as Ferguson chooses to use a mobilities

framework for his work, which provides some important insights into the "visceral experience of doing social work" (Ferguson 2009: 474). However, the actuality of risk, other than something experienced by social workers, remains unexplained. Future work will seek to explore how embodied social work practitioners experience risk, but Heidegger compels us to first deal with the thing itself.

Ferguson goes on to argue for writing about social work to include 'atmosphere' which captures the texture and feel of the lived experience of social work which impacts upon perception and what does and does not get done. He classifies risks as either: *systemic*, that contribute to how social work is organised and delivered; or *practice*, which involve the *doing* of child protection social work including the decisions social workers take about whether to examine children, ask specific questions of carers and the many other actions and movements made in relation to protecting children. Ferguson describes risks as being experienced by workers in particular places eg. the street, the car, the service users' home. We should, he argues, seek to understand social workers' everyday lived experiences of practice and the risks involved.

Here we see a recognition first of all that social workers are embodied and practising in a real-world context that encompasses 'atmosphere' or what I will go on to describe as 'mood'. But we also see that in thinking about risk we

have turned our gaze away from the service user and onto the professional. It is the social worker who is experiencing risk. The child does not experience risk. They experience harm or the fear of harm (which is in itself harmful). Parents whose parenting causes concern do not experience risk. If they did have concern for the potential harm to children and had the capacity to address that then social workers would not be involved. Parents are often caught up dealing with their own life-worlds that may in themselves be problematic to a point that they are unavailable to have concern for their children's safety. Risk is experienced by the professionals and their organisations who are keen to avoid the potential consequences to themselves of risk decisions.

Mood - Stimmung

As I have highlighted above, what I find particularly attractive about Heidegger's work is that he recognises the significance of caring. Human beings find it hard to come to understanding anything unless they care about it – that it *matters*. One must care in order to acquire knowledge and to will, wish or strive for anything one must already care in advance. Heidegger describes Dasein as we have seen: as ahead of itself, it is its possibilities; already in the world within specific situations that determines the possibilities open to it; alongside entities within the world – it is engaged with the world.

However, one of the consequences of caring is that one might experience adverse emotions such as fear or anxiety (Ratcliffe, 2013). If one did not care then fear and anxiety would struggle to exist. I argue that within social work they not only exist but predominate. Ferguson (2010:1106) states that:

> "social work involves walking in an atmosphere of tension and sometimes menace, pervaded by uncertainty, anxiety, fear and adventure…Social Work is walking as an adventure: up the stairway of high-rise flats, up the path to the home in anticipation of the visit; crossing the threshold of the home; and then getting out again. Even walking from the office to the car to make the journey can provoke anticipation and deep emotion."

We need to understand the differentiation between fear and anxiety if we are to maintain the 'fog' analogy so here comes my attempt to turn on the fog lights again.

The statement "Dasein is always already in a mood" (Heidegger, 1953:131) shows that mood is a crucial element for Heidegger as he goes on to argue that mood makes manifest "how one is and is coming along". Being in a mood "brings being to its 'there'" (131) and is therefore essentially Dasein. Heidegger thought that the impact of mood on Dasein was important in that

when one is in a bad mood, Dasein becomes blind to itself and the "surrounding world of heedfulness is veiled" (Heidegger, 1953: 133). This makes it hard for one to 'take care' and pay sufficient attention to one's being-in-the-world. Hence, my driving through fog analogy.

Moods differ from emotions, which concern particular entities. I am angry about something or with someone. But if I am in an irritable mood I need not be irritable about anything in particular. If moods are directed at anything they are directed at the world rather than entities within it. Anxiety casts a pall over the world in contrast to fear in the face of a specific threat. Moods are hardly within our control. I can control my behaviours and to a certain extent my emotions, but moods come and go unresponsive to our direction. Heidegger uses the word *befindlichkeit* which roughly translates as 'how one finds oneself' or 'how one is doing'. The more usual German word for mood is *stimmung* which also means the tuning of a musical instrument, which Heidegger exploits in order to think of mood as being attuned in a certain way. Dasein is never moodless any more than it is unconcerned.

Moran (2000) claims that Heidegger sharply distinguishes fear from anxiety. Fear is always fear *of something*, and for the sake *of something*. I might be afraid of the dogs my service users own or be afraid that a particular child may be harmed by a particular parent. Fear therefore has directedness. Anxiety,

however, is shapeless and does not have a precise object. Anxiety is precisely anxiety over nothing, that is no object other than our very being-in-the-world itself. “Being anxious discloses, primordially and directly, the world as world” (Heidegger, 1953:181)

Heidegger (1953) also talks about fearing involving others and this speaks directly to the social work encounter with risk. He talks about ‘fearing for…’ not taking away the other’s fear from him, recognising that when we are afraid for another there is no expectation that they have to have any fear on their own part. Another’s lack of fear for themselves can be precisely what informs our fear for them. It is a mode of co-attunement but not necessarily being afraid with them or even being afraid together.

Heidegger’s way of viewing *mood* not as a psychological subjective state, but as a way the world itself appears is a useful one for the purpose of this paper (Moran, 2000:241). I argue that social work as a profession has a default mood of anxiety. This anxiety arises because we care about doing the right thing in our interactions and interventions with our service users. It matters to us to get it right and we are constantly in this state of feeling anxious because we have a great deal of freedom to act without any clear instructions or guidance about what is the best thing to do or when to do it. Rather than accepting the existential nature of the profession and the need for phronesis

rooted in a knowledge base of praxis, we seek to manage this anxiety in two ways: by developing processes and procedures that clearly delineate next steps; and by dislocating ourselves from engagement with the people we work with through a risk narrative, which replaces anxiety with fear (e.g. fear that a child may be harmed). The risk narrative offers us some reassurance that our work has directedness - our job is to protect the child from harm. However, the complex interrelationships between strengths, resilience, weaknesses and family dynamics in a complex web of environmental, psychological and social factors that mitigate or heighten the likelihood of harm overwhelms us. We are therefore left with undirected anxiety that something is going to go wrong which potentially leads us to play safe and disengage. Proceduralisation and the increasing use of tools in assessment lead us towards a belief that we are thinking objectively and rationally, ignoring Merleau-Ponty's recognition that objective thought ignores the complex 'milieu' in which human meaning comes to expression, "objective thought is unaware of the subject of perception" (cited in Moran, 2000: 402). We are also tempted into believing that the situation that presents itself to us within families is fixed and unchanging. Merleau-Ponty would argue that the congealing of temporal thinking into language and concepts acts to fix meanings, to give the appearance of absoluteness (Moran, 2000: 405). Families are therefore left pinned to a set of meanings ascribed to them by the social work assessment that may leave little scope for change and agency.

Saltiel (2015) also describes social work decision-making as taking place within professional contexts marked by high-levels of professional anxiety. He argues that there is an increasing understanding that actuarial tools have limited usefulness and that decision-making tends to favour heuristic reasoning. What is also clear is that the risk pre-occupation not only has a negative impact upon service users but also upon social workers themselves.

> "Risk society theorists claim that contemporary life is saturated with considerations of risk, resulting in increased anxiety, uncertainty and even emotional breakdown" (Webb 2006:20)

Conclusion

Social Work is situated within the 'risk society' (Beck, 1992) so it is hardly surprising that the profession takes on society's preoccupation. I believe that preoccupation with risk and search for certainty lulls us into dependence upon procedure and process using flawed tools arising from an obstinate construct.

By what I hope is helpful discrimination against buying into the whole package of Heidegger, I have picked out what I think are some useful ideas for looking at the ontology of risk, not necessarily by its physical substance but by its usefulness as a construct and have found it not only wanting but an active

hindrance to effective social work. By arguing that risk is not a monster that we need to engage in combat but just a flawed construct that fogs our thinking, I have tried to consider the impact of risk on service users and social workers alike by first considering Heidegger's thinking about being-in-the-world. Heidegger however lacks discussion about the body which is sharply contrasted by Delancey (2009:369) to Merleau-Ponty's view of humans as essentially bodily – "they are their bodies and his belief that being in the world is only possible through a body". Future work will therefore re-consider Ferguson's work and how embodiment changes social work practice. I hope through all of this that I have sustained an argument that phenomenology has real value for thinking about and indeed practicing social work and believe that there is capacity to explore it further.

I have also argued that this pre-occupation with risk creates a mood for the profession and that mood is anxiety. In contrasting 'anxiety' with 'fear' I have tried to draw attention to the lack of direction in this mood which clouds our judgments however, only the reader can conclude if I have indeed turned the fog lights on and allowed a glimpse through the fog of risk, or if I have turned it into a pea-souper.

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