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Why agential realism matters to social work

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Abstract

This article is a theory-building exercise which focuses on Baradian agential realism to build a framework of key concepts and their inter-relationships to show how and why this perspective matters to social work. It makes a statement about the relevance of agential realism, in the writings of Karen Barad and other feminist posthumanist thinkers, to rethink fundamental concepts which are embedded in social work discourse, especially those humanist notions that relate to agency, subjectivity and reflection. It charts how agential realism can become foundational for social work knowledge. The article is intended both as an introduction to the thought of Barad and as a mapping of current agential realist scholarly trajectories. It guides the reader through the conceptual terrain of agential realist thought by explicating the key concepts of intra-action, entanglement, diffraction and agential cuts. In order to furnish an accessible engagement with Baradian theory, the article marshals case studies and references, drawing on ethnographic and qualitative research, which relate to social work. It concludes by showing how agential realism can provide a rich ontological framework for social work and highlights how it disrupts some of our long held cherished beliefs about what it means to do social work.
Keywords


Intended both as an introduction to the thought of the feminist posthumanist philosopher Karen Barad and as a mapping of current agential realist scholarship, this article traces the contributions of Baradian scholarship to widen perspectives in social work to the nuances of contemporary posthumanist theory. Other feminist posthumanist scholars, such as Jane Bennett, Donna Haraway, and Anna Tsing are introduced to help convey the potential significance of agential realism for social work (Bennett 2009; Haraway 1997; Tsing 2015).

In recent years, anthropocentrism - the view of privileging humans over all other creatures, casting humans as the only intelligent and purposeful agents - has been under attack from various sorts of posthumanism (see Wolfe, ‘What is Posthumanism’, 2009). The term posthumanist was introduced by Katherine Hayles (1999) twenty years ago to mean “after humanism” (p. 9), which is a rejection of the view that humankind is exceptional and is the most important element of existence. It designates a break from anthropocentric epistemology with its privileging of the human subject as an autonomous rational agent who is self-determining and responsible for their own actions. Taking up this critique this article argues that agential realism can provide a rich ontological framework for examining entangled relations between practitioner and service user that go beyond the anthropocentric paradigm that preoccupies mainstream social work. It also shows the importance to social work of rethinking the way materiality is implicated in a relational and performative ontology (see Hultin, ‘On becoming a sociomaterial researcher’, 2019).
By situating Barad’s posthumanist view of agency and drawing on related concepts of intra-action, entanglement and diffraction, it is shown how these practices are profoundly constitutive of the manner in which social workers and service users are enacted in their relational positions. From the agential realist perspective, front-line practices are particularly potent sites in which ontological, epistemological and ethical issues are richly interwoven. For social work this requires a movement beyond the conception of the intentional human and the non-intentional non-human in order to foreground the manner in which mundane practices always and already condition (or govern) the possibilities for a person’s subjectivity to be and to act (Munro and Hardie, 2019). To properly demonstrate the veracity of this new approach it is necessary to show how an agential realist interpretation coheres with what we know about social work and how this is can be empirically verified. Therefore, case examples are given throughout the article to help demonstrate this requirement for empirical grounding agential realism in social work contexts.

Non-representational ontology which focuses on embodied experience is yielding new insights in many social science fields but is yet to gain traction in social work (see Dewsbury, 2003). What is at stake here is a rejection of representational discourse and an insistence on the weight of material practices and a relational ontology that transverses boundaries such as objectivity and subjectivity (Cadman, 2009). The requisite ontological shift requires social work to attend to the specific material effect of practices of knowing, rather than a natural or discursive reality requiring representation (see Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012). This article demonstrates how agential realism undermines current theoretical foundations of subjectivity that are predominant in social work (see Højgaard and Søndergaard, 2011). Moreover, it claims that long-established categories must be re-questioned and challenged with the aim of sharing the benefit of understanding how embodied knowledge between human and non-
human actors takes place. Barad’s trajectory is ambitious and is systematically outlined in *Meeting the Universe Halfway*:

This book contributes to the founding of a new ontology, epistemology, and ethics, including a new understanding of the nature of scientific practices ... Indeed, the new philosophical framework that I propose entails a rethinking of fundamental concepts that support...binary thinking, including the notions of matter, discourse, causality, agency, power, identity, embodiment, objectivity, space, and time (2007, pp. 25–6).

**What is agential realism?**

A good starting point in unpacking Barad’s posthumanist theory is to situate agential realism within the broader sister field of philosophical realism. Realism is a widely scattered concept across the social sciences and has been discussed in the social work literature (Mäntysaari, 2005; Houston, 2010). In terms of realism’s theorisation of agency as performativity it is central to the writings of Pickering (1995) and relates to his theory of the mangle; it is also evident in the performative accounts of actor-networks in Latour (1999) Law and Hassard (1999) and Callon (1999); and is important in the object-oriented ontology of Harman (2018). Manuel DeLanda, one of the leading realist proponents provides a definitional starting point “there are philosophers who grant reality full autonomy from the human mind ... These philosophers are said to have a realist ontology” (2002, p. 4). Realism traditionally means, first and foremost, the view that a world exists independently of the mind. Barad states “We don’t obtain knowledge by standing outside the world; we know because we are of the world. We are part of the world in its differential becoming” (2007, p. 185).
Barad builds an ontological theory which thoroughly undermines the sort of representational thinking which dominates much of the psycho-social discourses on which social work depends heavily. For instance, social work’s privileging of “the use of self” in reflective practice is typical of this mental representational stance. This example, of social workers use of self is grounded in the conceptualisation of experiential learning and reflective thinking. The self is characterised as a mirroring of reality involving direct representations from the world. Agential realism challenges this conception of self and representation. Harman (2016) maintains that instead of the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent pre-existing things which positions us above or outside the world we merely reflect on, “Barad adopts a performative standpoint that insists on understanding, thinking, observing, and theorizing as practices of engagement with, and as part of, the world in which we have our being” (2016, p. 133). The world is not a static system of relations, but an active "doing" that establishes boundaries between discrete things. Barad calls these performative practices, also known as intra-actions, which make an agential cut” in the world so as to generate such boundaries (2007, p.140). Agential realism is concerned with ontological processes of performative formation whereby for Barad everything co-constitutes everything else. Boundaries and cuts are formed out of pre-existing entanglements. As Harman (2016) further points out “The individuality of specific people and things does not pre-exist their intra-action, but is carved out of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy” (2016, p.134).

Barad cites Bohr’s interpretation of quantum mechanics and demonstrates how it is coextensive with her philosophical concerns regarding representationalism and particularism. She describes Bohr’s contribution as follows:
… for Bohr, things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties, and words do not have inherently determinate meanings. Bohr also calls into question the related Cartesian belief in the inherent distinction between subject and object, and knower and known. Indeed, Bohr’s philosophy-physics poses a radical challenge not only to Newtonian physics but also to Cartesian epistemology and its representationalist structure of words, knowers, and things (Barad, 2007, p. 138).

Barad expands the significance of phenomena beyond quantum physics by developing an ontological statement for agential realism: “the primary ontological unit is not independent objects with inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena” (2007, p. 139). Phenomena are differential patterns of “mattering” and according to agential realism, the universe is made up of such phenomena. In a similar manner, social work practice is a specific form of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest. The practitioner is constituted in entangled phenomenon and not merely reflecting on or observing them at a distance. From this perspective social work is best conceived as an open ended and unfolding process in which the practitioner is drawn into and emerges from these entanglements. Phenomenon are not linguistic or perceptual representations, but rather as Barad describes:

A phenomenon is a specific intra-action of an 'object'; and the 'measuring agencies'; the object and the measuring agencies emerge from, rather than precede, the intra-action that produces them (2007, p. 128).

Agential realism is a performative theory of matter and meaning, which attends to productions of difference. The primary epistemological unit is “not independent objects with
inherent boundaries and properties but rather phenomena” (Barad, 2003, p. 815). She goes on to say that “reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things behind-phenomena but things-in-phenomena” (2003, p. 817). This sort of performative understanding of social work, for example, would take account of the fact that knowing does not come from reflecting, or standing at a distance and representing objectively, but rather from a direct material engagement with the world. This suggests that social work knowledge is always embedded in the material world. Similarly, agency is not a property or set of attributes that someone has, nor is it aligned with human intentionality or subjective choice, rather agency is an enactment of possible performative reconfigurations.

The person as subject and the object of action (the chair, for example) are part of a phenomenon which are artificially separated by what Barad refers to as an “agential cut”. Within phenomena, there are no inherent differences or boundaries between agencies of observation, such as the self, and objects; rather, differences and boundaries are instantiated by what Barad calls these agential cuts (1999, p. 2). This term refers to the “emergence and co-constitution of the objects of observation and the agencies of observation through particular material and conceptual epistemic practices” (2007, p. 195). Barad explains that “the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy” (2007, p. 140). Agential cuts therefore effect distinctions between the agencies of observation and observed, or between agency and structure which emerge from phenomenon. Barad claims that agential cuts produce determinacy from indeterminacy; they produce difference out of phenomena. In other words, agential cuts produce differences in the social and natural world. From this vantage point we can see how for Barad, agency is understood as a practical enactment, rather than a property or capacity of objects or
individuals. As Jane Bennett (2009) explains in an outline of her sister theory of vibrant materiality

… if human culture is inextricably enmeshed with vibrant, nonhuman agencies, and if human intentionality can be agentic only if accompanied by a vast entourage of nonhumans, then it seems that the appropriate unit of analysis for democratic theory is neither the individual human nor an exclusively human collective but the (ontologically heterogeneous) ‘public’ coalescing around a problem (p. 108).

Bennett goes on to say that dissolving the subject-object binary, and thereby improving our “ecological sensibility,” requires that we “begin to experience the relationship between persons and other materialities more horizontally” (2009, p. 10). Such an approach is sometimes referred to as a flat ontology, whereby, the factors which motivate macro-level change are always emergent from and ‘immanent’ to the systems in which the change occurs (Enemy Industry, 2010).

There are three further related concepts that form a crucial part of the theoretical fabric of Barad’s agential realism, these are: intra-action; entanglement and diffraction. I shall briefly deal with these in turn before going on to assess the contribution of agential realism for social work. Before explicating these important concepts, the diagram below is useful for readers as a heuristic device to guide thinking about the entangled relationships:
In her agential realist account Barad makes an important conceptual distinction between interaction and intra-action (Barad, 2014). As we’ve seen agency is not a property of a person, rather it is about the ways of doing or not doing things. It has both an active and passive component in the way it impacts on phenomenon. Barad is explicit about intra-actions as modes of becoming when she claims that “Matter is instances in its intra-active becomings – not a thing, but a doing, a congealing agency” (2003, p. 822). The importance of the key phrase "intra-acting" is defined by Barad as follows:

The notion of intra-action is a key element of my agential realist framework. The neologism "intra-action" signifies the mutual constitution of entangled agencies. That
is, in contrast to the usual "interaction" which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction, the notion of intra-action recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action. It is important to note that the "distinct" agencies are only distinct in a relational, not an absolute, sense, that is, *agencies are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they don't exist as individual elements* (2007, p. 33).

Barad recognises that practitioner and researchers alike are nervous about the idea of not having agency localised in a human subject, but she wishes to emphasise the value of focusing on the specificity of intra-actions to highlight the particularities of power imbalances in fields of complex forces. She maintains that “recognizing that there is not this kind of localization or particular characterization of the human subject is the first step in taking account of power imbalances, not an undoing of it” (2007, p. 178).

Many social workers are well versed in performing intra-actively even though they may not convey things in these terms. They know, for example, that in understanding domestic violence they are not concerned solely with situations which face them but are keenly interested in pathways into and out of situations and how relations change as part of this process. Considerations of space and time are explicitly included in social workers evaluation of domestic violence relationships. Walby and Towers, 2018, for example, “assess” three approaches to domestic violence: two that use a definition of ‘coercive control’ and one that uses ‘domestic violent crime’. They use these definitions to argue that different approaches emphasise a combination of issues related to temporal dimensions of power and economic resources. Like Barad, social workers are interested in how things come into being. Practitioners seek to identify how new boundaries and lines of demarcation can be produced.
to effectively intervene in keeping individuals safe (Witt and Diaz, 2019). Boundaries are the product of agential cuts (the cutting together, and cutting apart), and are performative framings. The precarity of relations for individuals experiencing domestic violence hinge precisely on the way that boundaries are repeatedly redrawn and redefined in the violent relation. Their making are instances of power which can have devastating consequences. So, whereas social work practitioners might not use Barad’s language of the mutual constitution of entangled agencies to describe intra-action, they do understand how domestic violence is materialised in entangled relations. They are conscious of how male perpetrators will sexually shame a girl friend or wife because of the way she dresses, stands “provocatively” at a bar, or wears her hair or make-up. The author recollects how one perpetrator revealed during an interview that he secretly sneaked into his wife’s bedroom with a pair of scissors while she was sleeping to cut off her long hair because it was “way too slutty” and caused too much attention around other men.

Without a material lens we miss the embodied and reduce dynamics to the purely psychological. Non-human agents are central to the intra-active process through which domestic violence takes form around gender, sexuality, bodies and power. With domestic violence social work practitioners will benefit from understanding how this is performed in relation to the enactment of binaries of safety/risk; responsibility/blame; bodies/emotions; strength/vulnerability and male/female. These distinctions [between bodies, attributes and situations] are actively created achievements rather than pre-given phenomenon. This helps demonstrate how domestic violence for social work is material (a performance of objects, things and physical relations), social (embodied gendered relations) and discursive (related to discourses of professional intervention and practitioner-service user talk). Barad reflects on the notion of “marked bodies” as a metaphor for domestic violence and the way women’s
“emotions” can be conceptualised as both affective territories of male interference and a gendered agential force (2007, p. 179).

The article now returns briefly to the issue of responsibility because it is a significant ethical issue faced by social work practitioners on a daily basis. Barad addresses this directly by saying that the “acknowledgment of non-human agency does not lessen human accountability; on the contrary it means that accountability requires that much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries” (2007, p. 116-117). Responsibility, then, is a matter of the ability to respond. Which she explains is about “Listening for the response of the other and an obligation to be responsive to the other, who is not entirely separate from what we call the self”. (interview with Barad, in Dolphijn and Tuin, 2012, p. 50). Thus, the ethical question for social workers is about concrete action, or “the doing” in the face of specific agential assemblages. It is worth noting that responsibility also has a legalistic inference in the sense that it can often imply culpability or egregious fault.

While Barad does not directly address issues of anti-oppressive practice her work is very suggestive for social work ethics. As Mauthner (2019) points out a posthumanist approach to oppressive practice would treat social work knowledge-making itself as a potential for discriminatory concern (p. 670). It shifts the focus away from the power of social workers over service users toward the “world-making” powers of practice interventions: their ability to constitute the very nature of their objects/subjects of intervention. The focus here is on the way social workers “make” various knowledge claims, draw boundaries around relations and justify or create expectations of responsibility. An anti-oppressive approach would focus on any intervention that claims to represent the world “as it really is” and which fails to acknowledge, ambiguity, uncertainty and incoherence.
Entanglement

Agential realism maintains that human life and non-human life is ontologically enmeshed. These more-than-human phenomena are variously described as companion species, creatures, critters, material things, actants, objects and powers which behave as meaningful agencies in their own right. The eruption of a volcano is a good example. It is a vital material thing that does not cease to exist or become more or less powerful as it is entangled in discourses about scientific apparatus of meteorology, aeronautics and vulcanology. Agential realism rejects the dominant Enlightenment perspective that presupposes a type of human exceptionalism. It asks us to reconsider foundational questions about the nature and scope of discourse, meaning, subjectivity and how these relate to questions of ethics and politics. Barad’s notion of entanglement is a thoroughly relational account of ontology which offers new ways of thinking about how we do social work. The implications for social work are that a materialist account of ontology establishes a new “figure of entanglement” for understanding practice as performativity. Barad teaches us that:

To be entangled is not simply to be intertwined with another, as in the joining of separate entities, but to lack an independent, self-contained existence. Existence is not an individual affair. Individuals do not pre-exist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating (2007, p. 52)

From this vantage point social work would view all encounters as instances of the way actors emerge out of entangled relationships which are congealed within networks of human and nonhuman phenomenon. Haraway (1997), for example, discusses companion species relations with dogs, cats, ducks, and rabbits as constitutive of human relations.
Barad’s theory of entanglement teaches us that human and nonhuman things do not just relate to each other. Rather they are entangled with each other in ways that are entrapping and asymmetrical. Entanglement theory proposes that things are so caught up in other things and in other human-thing dependences, such that everyday practices are directed down specific pathways, that actors are drawn in specific directions that create further entanglements. As Hodder (2016) explains entanglement demonstrates the need for us “to look away from whatever is the immediate object of study, to explore the networks of dependencies that constrain and drive the human condition” (p. 9). He further explains that:

The term entanglement seeks to capture the ways in which humans and things entrap each other. But it also seeks to recognize the ways in which a continual and exponentially increasing dynamism lies at the heart of the human experience (2016, p. 14).

Here’s a rich ethnographic case example that is instructive for social work. In Ann Tsing’s prizewinning *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) she shows us concretely how the relationship between humans and nature can be captured by the concept of “interspecies entanglements”. In discussing life in the “patchy landscapes” of capitalist ruins, her focus is on mushroom pickers who have migrated to the forests of Oregon from Vietnam in search of the rare and valuable matsutake mushroom. In Japan the mushroom is prized as a high-status delicacy that makes a refined gift. An interaction did not pre-exist in relations between Oregon, Vietnam and Japan, but a mutually constituted intra-action is enacted through the foraging of the mushroom. By tracing the fungi from consumption to production, she introduces a motley assortment of people who spend their time and effort eating, gifting,
trading, racketeering, foraging for, cultivating, and studying matsutake. Skipping between discussing forest animals to material waste, here is a feel of her materialist dance in a “track following” section:

Nonhuman pickers are at least as important as humans in this strategy. Deer and elk love matsutake, eating it in preference to other mushrooms. When we find the spoor of deer or elk, it often leads us to a path. Bears turn over logs with matsutake underneath to create quite a mess, digging up the ground. But bears – like deer and elk – never take all the mushrooms. Following the traces of animal lives, we entangle and align our movements, searching with them (2015, p. 247).

Tsing is describing an open-ended entanglement of ways of being in the harvesting and marketing of rare mushrooms, the way varied trajectories of human and nonhuman relations gain hold of each other, and with a great deal of indeterminacy at stake. To learn about an entanglement, practitioners need to unravel the network of relationships involved (2015, p. 83). For example, as social workers who try to untie these knots, we know the home is a place where dependencies within and among species can reach hothouse proportions. We often glean the strategic role the dog or cat can play as companion species in dysfunctional family dynamics. Encountering a troubled family for the first time in their home for a social worker is perhaps close to what Tsing refers to as a foraging expedition because of the uncertain pathways that lay ahead.

Diffraction
There is little room for the cherished “reflective practitioner” with Barad’s theory of agential realism. Reflection is replaced with diffraction as the principle concept to explain processes of difference and change. While work on ‘reflexivity’ and ‘critical reflection’ has over the years become predominant in social work, feminist philosophers suggest that diffraction is far more suitable for understanding interaction. Donna Haraway (1997), pioneered these debates, in proposing diffraction as an alternative to reflexivity, critical reflection and reflection. She argued:

Reflexivity has been much recommended as a critical practice, but my suspicion is that reflexivity, like reflection, only displaces the same elsewhere, setting up worries about copy and original and the search for the authentic and really real. (1997, p. 16).

For Haraway diffraction offers a fresh methodological strategy which breaks with self-reflection which she regards as reductionist. As discussed above the Cartesian claim that we have direct access to representations in our thoughts and that we do not have access to the outside or material world is also predicated on the idea of ourselves as independent individuals who are knowing reflective subjects (Murris and Bozalek, 2019). Whereas reflection creates a mirror image, or a copy, diffraction attends to the production of patterns of difference particularly in relation to disturbances and interferences. Diffraction examines the “mash-up” or the entangled state of knowing (Prophet and Pritchard, 2015, p. 334). Barad takes this a step further and offers diffraction as a productive model for thinking about non-representational methodological approaches. She says that “Diffraction is not a set pattern, but rather an iterative (re)configuring of patterns of differentiating-entangling” (2014, p. 168). Jackson (2014) develops Barad’s concept and discusses the merits of feminist diffraction methodology:
Barad argues that reflective metaphors overemphasize culture and thus disempower nonhuman nature as a “passive and immutable” medium waiting to be read and discovered by active science (p. 742).

and

[Barad] utilizes diffraction because, unlike mirrors or reflective tools, the structure of the diffraction grating used in the experiment (specifically the number of slits) affects the pattern produced (p. 742).

For both Haraway and Barad, “diffractive analysis constitutes an alternative methodology to critical reflection” (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 268). From this viewpoint “diffraction is not constituted as an inner mental activity inside a separated human being; rather it is an interconnected activity that entangles the human and the non-human” (Hultman and Lenz Taguchi, 2010, p. 539). By this account social work, would attend to the materiality of encounters of different diffraction pattern(ing) in practice. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) give a neat comparison of diffraction and critical reflection which is instructive for social work:

a diffractive analysis diverges from a self-reflective, phenomenological or interpretive reading of data, because it moves beyond the representational trap of trying to figure out what a participant really meant by what she or he said … Rather, a diffractive analysis views difference as a relational ontology, that is, an effect of connections and relations within and between different bodies, affecting other bodies and being affected by them (p.118).
Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) provide a good case example of how diffractive enquiry differs significantly from reflective practice. They use the reflective journal in which the intentionality of the practice teacher and student is paramount and requires a self-referential engagement, looking back in hindsight on one’s own motives and practices. Working as a collective reading group they summarise their findings as follows:

What working with diffractive methodology did was to open this space further to enable us to see that it is not the (reflexive) self that has constitutive force, but self and others (social and material elements), entangled in multiple ways and across multiple spaces and times. To learn diffracively, we had to unlearn our drive to engage in a reflective process focused on the self or searching for interpretations, as this suppressed the alternative possibilities that we might have come up with opening up to the ontology of learning – e.g. paying attention to the entangling of bodies, materialities, flows and intensities generated by our collaboration in the spaces of a physical setting, yet across the internet all over the globe (p. 123).

The authors conclude that diffraction reconfigures practice away from the judgemental moralism implicit in reflective practice and is instead an affirmative methodology which has “a great deal to offer for reconfiguring liberal humanist practices used in research methodology and front-line practice” (2017, p. 123).

**Fields of Entanglement in Social Work**

18
This final section examines the way a materialist approach can benefit the relationship between social work research and practice. Field philosophy has emerged as an approach that significantly overlaps with and contributes to social work. Research is best practiced through a commitment to contextually-situated knowledge through field research. As Buchanan, Bastian and Chrulew explain “By exploring relations within and between human communities, nonhuman animals, plants, fungi, forests, microbes, minerals, spirits, and scientific practices, for instance, the environmental humanities have expanded the sphere of whose voices matter in the production of knowledge” (2018, p. 383).

Field research offers a more experiential and lived form of engagement for social work practitioners. As a persistent practice of anthropology, it is commensurate with the agential realist perspective and provides a rich method for understanding its key concepts of entanglement, agential-cuts, intra-action and diffraction. According to Barad, both experimental and theoretical practices involve intra-acting. For her “experimenting and theorising are dynamic practices that play a constitutive role in the production of objects and subjects and matter and meaning … (they) are not about intervening (from outside) but about intra-acting from within, as part of the phenomena produced” (Barad, 2007, p. 56). The same could be said about social work, as is evident in the processes associated with casework. The researcher and practitioner are simultaneously producing phenomena and not only observing them. Intervention does not come from outside but involves entanglements and agential cuts which constitutes categories. Barad summarises this as follows: “Scientific practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest” (2007, p. 336). Here we can add social work practice as a specific form of engagement that makes specific phenomena manifest. The example below provides an interesting alternative to Piaget’s
developmental child-centric view, which illustrates the way agential realism casts a radically different account for social work.

Social workers are keenly interested in incorporating a child’s perspective into their practice and pay close attention to the “child’s voice”. Using Piaget’s transcripts, the innovative research by Teresa Aslanian (2018) shows how a posthuman theoretical framework might contribute to social work research which focuses on children’s perspectives. Piaget observed that children of a certain age show a lack of differentiation between thought and things. He gives the following example of this phenomenon:

I- Does the moon move or not?  
C- It follows us.  
I- Why?  
C- When we go, it goes.  
I- What makes it move?  
C- We do.  
I- How?  
C- When we walk. It goes by itself (Piaget, 1929/1967, p. 147).

Piaget describes this as a form of ‘ontological egocentricity’ (Piaget, 1929/1967, pp. 166–168). However, as Aslanian argues “if we read these ideas through the lens of Barad (2007), it can be understood as an intuitive sense of the entanglement of matter and meaning and the co-productive, relational nature of agency” (2018, p. 423). She stresses that it is important how we make sense of the agential cut of move/follow/walk in the above transcript. By acknowledging the mutual agency between the child and the moon Aslanian suggests that:

… the Cartesian ontological stance is shifted, from ‘I think, therefore I am’, to ‘I relate, therefore I am’—and by extension, ‘I relate to it, therefore we are’. This idea of participation can be understood from a posthuman perspective as the perception of
knowing and being as inseparable, the result of the mutual production that is the intra-action of human and other-than-human phenomena (2018, p. 423).

The implications of this alternative reading of the entanglement of meaning and matter when working with children is neatly summarised by Shotter who tells us that “in enacting agential cuts, we must see ourselves as exhibiting at least two aspects, one which does the sensing, and another which is subjected to what is sensed” (2014, p. 321). The situated performances caught within the intra-actions of social workers and children may turn out to be of good practical use in developing a deeper understanding of the child’s voice.

We’ve seen how entanglement provides the basis for a critique of mainstream social work concerns. With agential realism, as Barad (2007) notes, our current individualistic assumptions - that certain events out in the world follow as a consequence of human actions, choices, intentions, presuppositions need to be radically re-thought as “after the fact attributions we make in relation to the outcomes” (p. 133) of what she calls intra-active events. Agential realism challenges the mainstream liberal humanist account of social work and replaces it with a materialist semiotic account. The liberal humanist perspective, as advocated by van Breda (2018), falsely conflates the distinction between agency and subjectivity. This is particularly evident in the “psyche” literature of social work (motivational and cognitive behavioural) which constructs a hyper-individual, one that is almost entirely determined by characteristics of internal attributions (Bowlby’s notion of “internal working models” comprising mental representations is typically used by social work, see Trevithick, 2018). Mindfulness accurately fits this designation of hyper-individual construction and is sanguinely characterised for social work practitioners as promoting self-efficacy in “my secret space” (Kinman et al., 2019, p. 16).
Fields of entanglement also provide a point of critique for social work’s emphasis on linearity and planning. Social work is bound up with idea of directionality. This is why planning, targets and pathways are so important to its mission. Such activities have been dismissively referred to as “technical rational (means-end) preoccupations” of social work (Ferguson, 2018, p. 416). Social work figures this trajectory as purposeful or goal-directed such that an expressive intentionality is assumed on the part of any compliant service user. Receptivity to the intervention is therefore crucial for the expression to come about. From an agential realist perspective, however, things are not so straight forward. With agential realism phenomenon don’t occur in a progressive, linear or sequential way always originating from the human actor. As Bennett says: “a trajectory, a directionality or movement away from somewhere even if the toward-which it moves is obscure or even absent” (2009, p. 32).

If we accept Barad’s critique of causality, things don’t follow automatically from one point to the next in a linear way. She contends that directionality emerges in phenomena rather than preceding it through unilateral movements from causes to effects. Rather than conceiving of the service-user as the follower of a direction mapped by social work, it is more profitable to consider the relation as “togethering”. But it is how things come together, rather than why things come together that is most revealing. Focusing on processes of formation in social work might be preferable to identifying purposes and goals. Thus, the relation between social worker and service user is not a network of orientations but a meshwork of interwoven lines of growth, decay and movement. Agential realism leads to a very different conception of what we can hope for in “doing” the practice of social work: instead of reaching for attributional understandings (about family life or poverty), we find that the partial and
situated results we *can* in fact obtain will in the end, perhaps surprisingly, turn out to be of far greater practical use to social work and provide a foundation for social work knowledge.

**Conclusion**

Agential realism disrupts the conventional narrative that underlie many assumptions social work makes about human agency and subjectivity. If agential realism is correct, it literally turns our common assumptions about social work processes and relationships inside-out. In the posthumanist world of Barad, we would barely recognise ourselves because social work is reconfigured through the foregrounding of the dynamic relation of the human and non-human as ontological processes of materialisation, in enactments. Casework notes, risk assessments and support plans would have to be re-written. Considerations on causality and responsibility would need to change. No longer located in a conventional liberal humanism we arrive at a point of “becoming” (post)social work which is opened by the agential realist perspective.

This perspective radically disrupts our long held cherished beliefs about what it means to be a person or a self as well as the effects of social work interventions in people’s lives. For example, the essentialist psychological “properties” we constantly talk about in social work as the focus of our interventions (“at risk”, “resilient”, “looked after”) are best thought of as *after the fact* emergents. Attention moves away from fixed attributions and “characteristics” with issues continuing to be “entangled” even when their distinct contours appear. Nor can we think of social workers as simply facing the task of discovering the self-efficacy of the service user’s world, in terms of their motivations, perceptions, voices and lived experiences, with the aim of converting them into *a set of aims*, tasks and outcomes. The service user’s world is best understood as a pattern of becoming that emerges through an ongoing process of entanglement and response with its local environment. As things stand social work tends to
think the world is made up of discrete subjects (persons, families, or communities), and that qualities of practitioner and service user existed prior to their exchanges.

Importantly, we have seen how agential realism rejects any notion of an independent self-contained existence, which the social work literature relies on. The service user and social work practitioner emerge through the mutual entanglements with humans and non-humans and through different species, bodies of matter, “each with their own force or agency” (Barad, 2007, p. x). It is worth noting the claim made by Bunn and Lumb that these humanist individualistic conceptualisations “produce undemocratic social possibilities, built on assumptions that individuals have the capacity to rationally choose pathways that will maximise their own interests ignoring the contextually bound ways in which this produces, and reproduces trajectories of disadvantage and advantage within society” (2019, p. 7). It remains to be seen whether agential realism can offer a more democratically accountable social work during these times of great uncertainty.
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