

## What comes after the subject? Towards a critical posthumanist social work

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## What comes after the subject? Towards a Critical Posthumanist Social Work

Stephen A. Webb

Foucault's famous ending to *The Order of Things* declares that (hu)man is a recent invention. This led writers such as Derrida and Deleuze to speculate that Foucault had in mind the modern invention of the self and personal identity in the work of John Locke and specifically in the 1689 publication of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. However, debates about the relation between humans and non-humans as part of the post-anthropocentric scene have been around for only three decades. It is only recently that these have been honed around the banners of feminist materialism, actor network theory, object-oriented ontology and posthumanism. This chapter addresses social work from an environmental standpoint and argues that it should urgently embrace an agential realist perspective based on a post-anthropocentric ethics. The main aim of the chapter is to call for a 'post-anthropocentric turn' in social work by emphasising the concern that the Anthropocene and the ecological crisis are only symptoms: it is time to address the causes, which have been identified in the anthropocentric worldview based on an autonomous conception of the human as a self-defining agent and as exceptional. We must begin to unpick the knotted cluster of reassuring, mutually confirming truisms which represent humanity as Nature's most precious subject, regarding animals as only a means to human ends. We should also challenge the claims that individuated human agency is the exclusive domain of political action, subjectivity, and community. The grounds of these claims for human centering frequently rest on the idea that the human is exceptional. Mainstream social work endorses this anthropocentric worldview. It is part of the anthropological machinery which continues to produce our self-identity and

human uniqueness. The chapter shows how an urgent response to this ecological crisis lies in posthumanism which takes a theoretical post-anthropocentric shift in the current perception of the human. A passage from liberal humanism to posthumanism is necessary for social work on environmental ethical terms. In doing so it should endorse a green republicanism which emphasises a de-growth agenda along with the importance of reciprocity, commitment, and sustainable ways of caring for the Earth. For those wishing to push this thought experiment even further, considerations of alternative forms of life must constitute the subject matter of social work. The chapter offers a framework for a distinct posthuman understanding of social work as relationally entangled, emergent and materializing.

This chapter forms part of an innovative edited collection which contests anthropocentric bias in social work. Post-anthropocentric scholarship attempts to transform the current environmental predicament that facilitates neoliberal capitalism which reduces all forms of life and matter to the service of market economies. Thus, there is an ethics at work in the way contributors to this book relocate humans not as exceptional beings entitled to dominate the planet but as one kind of actor, along with many other non-human actors and agents that together create the entangled complexities in which we all exist. For an environmentally attuned social work, the ethical stakes are high. The politics and policies that emerge from post-anthropocentric ethical considerations would be far more conducive to sustainable futures and climate justice than our present anthropocentric trajectory. Indeed, it is only through a radical decentring of the human within our worldview that “degrowth” societies are most likely to endure in the future. In an era of environmental crisis, resource depletion and ever-accelerating technological change, social and political thought cannot ignore the ecological dimension that situates humans and their societies within the entangled species and technological relations that support life and its metamorphoses.

The chapter asks the questions: What does it mean to think beyond the human in social work? Is it possible to craft a mode of intervention and ethics, that rejects mainstream social work preoccupations with the human and the classic humanist binaries of self and other, mind and body, society and nature, human and animal, organic and technological? Can the privileged place designated to the human with its related artefacts of rationality and purpose be overcome? What would social work look like if the concentration on the human is displaced? These questions are currently being debated more widely in political anthropology, philosophy and environmental studies. They lead us to ask if a new kind of posthumanist social work can enable a redefinition of the place of the human by introducing both the technological and the biological or "green" continuum in which the "human" is but one life form among many? Indeed, it can be said that the construction of the human subject rests upon a purely functional division and separation, one which has no substance in and of itself other than its ability to signify. Does the overturning of the centrality of the human in social work permit a new ethics derived from a vibrant connectedness with living ecology, materiality and the place we occupy within it?

How can social work imagine life which does not privilege human subjectivity? Thinking beyond the human in a veritable sense is to renounce grounding one's self in some form of identity, which on the one hand, provides a supposed protective interiority against the outside, and, on the other hand, paradoxically seeks to be in service of some foundational homogenised order of community that excludes those who do not fit in. This is the tragedy of identity politics. Social work would break from such an enclosing identity-formation that privileges the human and open itself to (an)other that radically deviates from humanism. In

her nomadic vision of the collective Braidotti urges us to abandon the notion of identity, and makes a strong link between posthumanism and postidentitarian politics: -

... we have to start by eliminating identities. We will never arrive anywhere if we have identity as a starting point. In fact the whole process of *becoming* is a process of abandoning identity and entering in the construction of subjectivity, subjectivity being per definition transversal, collective. This is an enormous switch because even the political movements I have known in the 70s were identitarian movements: women's movements would fight for women; gay movements would fight for gays.

(‘On nomadism: A conversation with Rosi Braidotti’

<http://politicalcritique.org/world/2018/nomadism-braidotti/>)

If we are to press ahead in developing a critical posthumanist perspective for social work and move debates about environmental social work centre-stage, we must ensure there are frameworks that attain theoretical coherence for this radical new approach. Munro et al. (2016) argues that there must be a ‘theoretical coherence’ that informs practice and that guides what social workers actually do in their work with service users. A key aspect of orientating theories is how they position the social worker in relation to a value base and direct work with service users, and the effect this has on both aspects. To facilitate theoretical coherence, we can draw on Matthew Gladden’s (2018) helpful conceptual framework for classifying existing and potential forms of posthumanism. The framework suggests that any given form of posthumanism can be classified: 1) either as an analytic posthumanism that understands ‘posthumanity’ as a socio-technological reality that already exists in the contemporary world or as a synthetic posthumanism that understands ‘posthumanity’ as a

collection of hypothetical future entities whose development can be intentionally realized or prevented; and 2) either as a theoretical posthumanism that primarily seeks to develop new knowledge or as a practical posthumanism that seeks to bring about some social, political, economic, or technological change. For social work, we are particularly interested in the latter and there are perspectives which afford the possibility of posthumanist theoretical coherence for social work providing analytic, synthetic, theoretical, and practical aspects. These are elucidated in the sections which follow and are discussed in relation to Karen Barad's "agential realism" as a posthumanist theory. This perspective can positively contribute to rethinking social work in post anthropocentric terms.<sup>1</sup>

### **Barad and Agential Realism**

Karen 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" (Barad 2007: 185). She builds a non-essentialist ontological theory which thoroughly undermines the sort of representational thinking which dominates much of the psycho-social discourses on which social work so heavily depends. For instance, social work's privileging of "the use of self" in reflective practice is typical of this mental representational paradigm. Harman (2016) summarizes that instead of "the representationalist belief in the power of words to represent

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<sup>1</sup> It's worth noting that Katherine Hayles's posthumanism is also a likely contender to fill this space. Since its publication in 2017, her *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious* not only builds on the rich vein of ideas developed in *How we Became Posthuman* (1999); but is trailblazing new posthuman scholarship which grapples with conditions of thought, the specificity of consciousness, and ethical modes of multispecies living on an ecologically threatened planet. She makes the bold claim that processes of nonconscious cognition can be observed in all organisms from slime to foxes, anemones to gorillas. Hayles proposes a definition for cognition that applies to technical systems as well as biological life-forms. Like Barad, this is an anti-human exceptionalism treatise which demonstrates the environmental devastation resulting from biased beliefs that humans are the dominant species on Earth because of their cognitive abilities (2017, p.3).

pre-existing things...which positions us above or outside the world we allegedly 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, the world in which we have our being" (2007, p.133). The world is not a static system of relations, but an active "doing" that establishes boundaries between discrete things (2007: 135). It is 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 formation in which for Barad everything co-constitutes everything else. Boundaries and cuts are formed out of pre-existing entanglements. As Harman (2016) 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".

Agential realism is predicated upon Bohr's interpretation of quantum mechanics, which Barad finds to be 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: 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. From an agential realist perspective, the smallest units of analysis are phenomena which are iterative encounters in the material world rather than linguistic or perceptual representations.

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. (Barad, 2007: 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: 815). She goes on to say that “reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things behind-phenomena but “things-in-phenomena” (2003: 817). A 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. (Barad, 2007: 49). Therefore, 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 reconfigurations.



The subject and object 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 and objects; rather, differences and boundaries are instantiated by what Barad calls these agential cuts (1999: 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: 195). Barad explains that “the agential cut enacts a resolution within the phenomenon of the inherent ontological (and semantic) indeterminacy” (2007: 140). Agential cuts therefore effect distinctions between subjects and objects out of phenomena, between the agencies of observation and observed, or between agency and structure. Barad claims that agential cuts produce determinacy from indeterminacy; they produce difference out of phenomena. In other words, agential cuts produce all different differences in the social and natural world. Simultaneous practices of differentiation and connection are at work in the production of phenomenon. This has interesting implications for how we approach social work practice. For example, it is suggestive of ways to better understand boundary creations between practitioners and service-users. It can assist in critically addressing, for instance, the controversial topic of “disguised compliance” in social work, as an active/passive boundary making device based on power; it can also shed light on the way more experimental practices can be marginalised as mainstream determinacies are hardened at the expense of others. 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 we shall see, this begs important questions about responsibility and intention. 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” (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” (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)<sup>2</sup>

There are two related concepts that form a crucial part of the theoretical fabric of Barad’s agential realism, these are: intra-action; and entanglement. I shall briefly deal with these in turn before going on to assess the contribution of agential realism for a posthumanist 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:

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<sup>2</sup> Braidotti (2018) is critical of the notion of flat ontology, especially as formulated in Latour’s Actor Network Theory. She maintains that by positing generalized symmetry of actors and objects, ANT prevents any analysis of the power relations at work between them. She argues that Latour dismissed the critical task of epistemology, in favour of the flat ontological equality of actors, which results in the problematic move to reject the need for any theorization of subjectivity, which for Braidotti is undoing the possibility of a political project altogether.

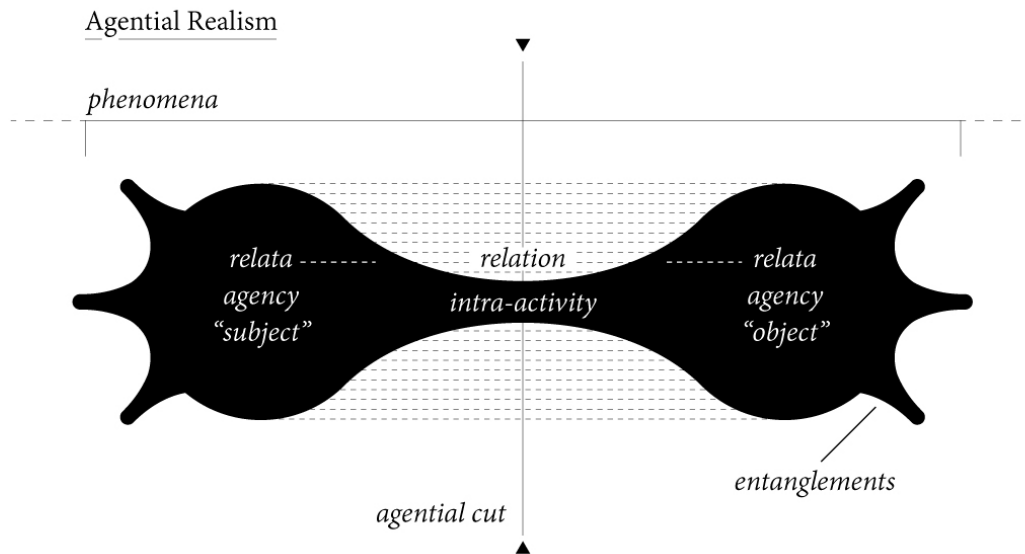


Figure 1. Lewis, (2016) [Representation of Barad’s Agential Realism. Permission to reproduce has been obtained from the author].

### **Intra-action**

In her agential realist account, Barad makes a conceptual distinction between *interaction* and *intra-action*. Intra-actions enact agential cuts, which are “a cutting together-apart (that is, entangling-differentiating), as one move (not sequential acts)”. (Barad, 2014: 31). As we’ve seen, agency is not a property of a person, rather it is about the ways of doing or not doing things in a material world. 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: 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: 33)

Barad recognises that practitioner and researchers alike are nervous about not having agency localised in a human subject, but she wants to emphasise the value of focusing on the specificity of intra-actions to highlight the particularities of power imbalances in fields of human-to-nonhuman relations. 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”. In an interview she uses the example of Wilbert’s (2006) “Profit, Plague and Poultry: The Intra-active Worlds of Highly Pathogenic Avian Flu” to show how intra-action provides the key to understanding the bio-geo-politics of potential flu pandemics. Barad proposes that traditional “interactional analysis of causality” leaves out much of the important entangled variables that tell us what is really happening with epidemics and the spread of diseases. Here is what she has to say about the benefits of an intra-active approach to the analysis of large-scale factory production of poultry:

Chris Wilbert points out that while world health organizations and governments are placing migratory birds and small farm chicken producers under surveillance, the

empirical data does not support these causal linkages. Rather, the disease follows the geographical diffraction patterns of large-scale factory farmed production of poultry.<sup>3</sup> The latter gives rise to unprecedented densities of birds, making first-class lodgings for thriving and mutating zoonoses. Industrially produced meats, international veterinary practices, biosecurity practices, international trade agreements, transport networks, increased density of human populations, are among the various agential apparatuses at work. Causality is not interactional, but rather intra-actional. Making policy based on additive approaches to multiple causes, misses key factors in avoiding epidemics such as providing inexpensive forms of safe food for the poorest populations and the elimination of industrial forms of the mass killing of animals.

(in Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 49)

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. Aspects of space and time are explicitly included in the evaluation of domestic violence relations.<sup>4</sup> Like Barad they are interested in how things come into being.

Practitioners seek to identify how new boundaries and lines of demarcation can be produced

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<sup>3</sup> While it is beyond the scope of this discussion it is important to note that Barad's concept of diffraction offers a significant alternative to and critique of reflective practice in social work. Bozalek and Zembylas (2017) argue that diffractive methodologies develop in response to a dissatisfaction with practices of 'reflexivity', which are seen to be grounded in a representational paradigm in educational and social work research. While work on 'reflexivity' and 'critical reflection' has over the years become predominant in educational research methodology literature, there is important conceptual work to be done putting these two practices – reflection and diffraction – in conversation with each other

<sup>4</sup> For Barad spatiality and temporality co-exist as forces of becoming queer or straight. Subjectivities are best studied if spatiality and temporality are taken up as constituting forces in the production of subjectivities. There are no anchors or sense of fixed identities, but what Barad calls the making of "spacetime-mattering".

to effectively intervene in keeping women safe (Witt and Diaz, 2019). Boundaries are the product of agential cuts (the cutting together, and cutting apart), and not neutral. The precarity of relations for a woman 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 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. 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. The concept of agential cut is useful in this context; recalling that the split into subject and object is enacted in each case, rather than given. 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). Using Barad's work Whynacht (2007) reflects on the notion of "marked bodies" as a metaphor for the felt experience of domestic violence and the way women's "emotions" can

be conceptualised as both affective territories of male interference and gendered agential force. To return briefly to the issue of responsibility because it weighs heavily on issues discussed here. 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: 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 & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 50). Thus, the ethical question for social workers is about concrete action in the face of specific agential assemblages.

### **Entanglement**

Agential realism maintains that human and more-than-human life are 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 refers to a thoroughly relational account of ontology which offers new ways of thinking about doing social work. It will be shown that the implications for social work are that a materialist account of ontology

and politics establishes a new “figure of entanglement” for understanding practice as material 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: 52).

From this vantage point, a posthumanist social work would view all encounters as instances of the way actors emerge out of entangled relationships which fundamentally involve networks of human and nonhuman phenomenon. Haraway (1997) discusses companion species relations with dogs, cats and rabbits. For instance, we touch and are simultaneously touched. People are affected by the swarm of objects/things in everyday life.

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 (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 (14).

Here's a rich ethnographic case example. Ann Tsing's prizewinning *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) shows us concretely how the relationship between humans and nature can be captured by the concept of "interspecies entanglements".<sup>5</sup> 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

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<sup>5</sup> The collection *The Art of Living on a Damaged Planet* (2017), edited by Anna Tsing, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan and Nils Bubandt vividly shows how the Earth generates new life forms and how the ecosystem of the planet does not particular need humans to survive and would probably be better off without us.

– never take all the mushrooms. Following the traces of animal lives, we entangle and align our movements, searching with them (2015: 247).

And then in a flurry she is quickly on to the relation between material trash and the human tracking of matsutake:

But out looking for life lines, a little trash helps. Not the mountains of beer cans white hunters leave, but a little trash tracked through the forest. A wrinkled piece of tin foil, the discarded vial of a ginseng tonic, a soggy box of Zhong Han Hai Super Cheap Chinese cigarettes: Each of these is a sign that a Southeast Asian picker had passed through. It keeps me from getting lost: it puts me on the track for mushrooms. Intersecting life lines guide the performance creating one mode of forest knowledge (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, one unravels its knots (83). 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 (see Lynch in this book). We often glean the strategic role the dog or cat can play as companion species in so-called “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. Consider the remarkable claims she makes in an essay dedicated to Donna Haraway:

Following fungi, we forage in the last ten thousand years of human disturbance history with feminist multispecies company. Cereals domesticate humans. Plantations give us the subspecies we call race. The home cordons off inter- and intra-species love. But mushroom collecting brings us somewhere else—to the unruly edges and seams of imperial space where we cannot ignore the interspecies interdependencies that give us life on earth (2012: 141).

### **Fields of Entanglement**

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 practitioners. As a persistent practice of anthropology, it is commensurate with the agential realist perspective and provides a rich experimental method for understanding its key concepts of entanglement, agential-cuts and intra-action. 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: 56). The same could be said about social work, as is evident in the

processes associated with casework. The researcher and practitioner are literally producing phenomena and not only observing them. Intervention does not come from outside but involves entanglements and agential cuts which constitutes the categories.<sup>6</sup> She summarises as follows: “Scientific practices are specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest” (Barad, 2007: 336). And here we can add social work practice as specific forms of engagement that make specific phenomena manifest. An example which provides an interesting alternative to Piaget’s developmental child-centric view illustrates how agential realism casts a radically different account. 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 shows how a posthuman theoretical framework might contribute to practice research which focuses on children’s perspectives.<sup>7</sup> 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: 147)

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<sup>6</sup> Maggie MacLure has been influential, along with writers such as Mauthner and Mazzei and Jackson, in developing a “post qualitative approach” to social science research which is compatible with post-humanist perspectives. The post qualitative turn offers a fundamental challenge to the humanist notion of the “self.” MacLure (2013) presses for the development of *post-representational* research practices, drawing on contemporary materialist work. She rejects the static, hierarchical logic of representation, and practices such as interpretation and analysis as conventionally understood (also see MacLure, 2018).

<sup>7</sup> In ‘Rethinking Nature-Based Approaches in Early Childhood Education: Common Worlding Practices’ (2018), Nelson, Pacini-Ketchabaw and Nxumalo develop posthumanist perspective for childhood studies and introduce common worlding approaches in early childhood education as possibilities for situating educational practices within current times of environmental precarity.

Piaget describes this as a form of ‘ontological egocentricity’ (Piaget, 1929/1967: 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: 423). 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 (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: 321). The situated performances which are caught within the intra-actions of social workers and children may turn out to be of good practical use in understanding the child’s voice.

## **Conclusion**

Agential realism disrupts conventional anthropocentric views 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 spacetime-mattering enactments. Casework notes, risk assessments and support plans would have to be re-written.

Considerations of causality and responsibility would need to change. Located in neither a conventional humanism nor the deconstructive variant of social constructivism, we arrive at a point of “becoming” (post)social work which has been discussed in this chapter. Agential realism radically disrupts our long-held cherished beliefs about what it means to be a person or a self as well as the effects our interventions have on people’s lives. 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 different issues continuing to be “entangled” even when their distinct contours appear.<sup>8</sup> 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 to 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. Service user A pre-exists the interview with social worker Z who will be conducting the interview in an hour.

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<sup>8</sup> It is worth noting in this respect that the UK Home Office applies the controversial "good character" test on children who have foreign nationality but whose cultural links and identity are British. Home Office guidance tells caseworkers how to consider whether a person applying for British citizenship meets the good character requirement.

With agential realism, as Barad (2007) notes, our current anthropocentric assumptions - that certain events out in the world follow as a consequence of human actions, choices, intentions, presuppositions, and the like - need to be radically re-thought, or re-visioned, as “after the fact” attributions we make in relation to the outcomes of what she calls intra-active events. With agential realism the mainstream liberal humanist account of social work is replaced with a materialist semiotic account of social work. The 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 the 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 humanism and is sanguinely characterised for social work practitioners as promoting self-efficacy in “my secret space” (Grant & Kinman, 2012). 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: 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: 7).

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 post anthropocentric social work.

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