International Journal of Social Pedagogy

It really does depend: Towards an epistemology (and ontology) for everyday social pedagogical practice

Mark Smith

Professor of Social Work, University of Dundee, School of Education and Social Work, Perth Road, Dundee DD1 4HN, Scotland; m.z.v.smith@dundee.ac.uk

Peer review:

This article has been peer-reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind peer review, where both the reviewers and authors are anonymised during review.

Open access:

International Journal of Social Pedagogy is a peer-reviewed open-access journal.

Abstract

Understandings of knowledge in social work, in the UK at least, are based on an assumption that theory – increasingly derived from 'scientific' or 'evidence-based' perspectives – can be abstracted and applied to practice. Essentially, knowledge acquisition and utilisation are seen as transactional, instrumental endeavours. Such a view does not fit with the realities of everyday social pedagogical practice. This article begins to develop an alternative conception of social work/social pedagogical knowledge from an Aristotelean position, within which the relationship between theory and practice happens in the domain of *praxis*; this is not a direct mapping of theory onto practice but operates in a constant dialectic within which one informs and indeed collapses into the other. Effective *praxis* requires Aristotle's intellectual virtue of *phronesis* (practical reasoning or judgement). Phronesis understands practice within its wider moral purpose and foregrounds the virtues and dispositions of practitioners rather than a set of rules. Knowing and being (epistemology and ontology) therefore come together in how practitioners engage in everyday practice. This proposition challenges dominant technical and instrumental conceptions of knowledge and, more generally, of the way in which professional practice is currently understood.

Keywords: Aristotle; residential child care; social work; knowledge; everyday; flourishing; *phronesis*; practice; *praxis*

Introduction

I write this article as a qualified social worker who, unusually, spent all of my time in practice in residential child care settings before moving into the social work academy. For a number of reasons, including the affinity of residential child care to social pedagogy and on account of the broadly educational orientation I hold towards how people grow and change, I consider myself to be a social pedagogue. But, as there is no recognised profession of social pedagogy in Scotland where I work, or in the UK more generally, my frames of reference reflect social pedagogy, social work and child and youth care and, in this article, I flit between these terms and literatures. While my own background is in residential child care, the arguments I develop here are more broadly applicable across the range of practice domains that social pedagogues operate in.

Social pedagogy as everyday practice

The idea of the everyday is central to child and youth care (Garfat, 2002). Maier (1987), for example, has located child and youth care practice within 'the minutiae of everyday life, the little things, the small, seemingly unimportant events, out of which the days of our lives are constructed: things like waiting for meal-times, occasions of leave-taking, or just coming into contact with one another' (cited in Garfat, 2002, n.p.). It is also central to social pedagogy, key principles of which emphasise qualities of relationship, reflexivity, a lifespace or lifeworld orientation and a practical and creative approach to everyday living (Grunwald and Thiersch, 2009; Petrie et al., 2009).

In such settings, dominant casework models of practice, which borrow largely from a medically oriented and linear model of assessment, planning and intervention, rarely fit with the kind of work that practitioners do; casework does not resonate with the day-to-day experience of doing effective child and youth care or social pedagogical work (Phelan, 2001). Casework is based, largely, on developmentally normative assumptions of human functioning and how people might be helped to fit within these. This may be fine up to a point: there are good reasons why we might want people to fit comfortably within societal norms and for them to want to do so. However, how this happens is not straightforward. Development and growth in child and youth care is 'a mysterious, asynchronous, nonlinear process and dynamic . . . [and] its pedagogy is not interventionist and direct . . . [but] indirect, cooperative, collaborative and invitational' (Magnuson, 2004, pp. xxii–xxiii). Such an orientation towards human growth and change depends upon openness to the significance of lived experiences and a sensitivity to the cultural narratives these draw upon (Cleary, 2019). It also requires that we bring our own 'being' (Friesen, Savi and Henriksson, 2012) into the situations we find ourselves in. It is this emphasis on the 'self' and on 'being' that signals what is perhaps the defining feature of social pedagogy or child and youth care work (Fewster, 1990).

Practice from such a 'self-in-action' perspective happens through everyday encounters, 'so general as to be inseparable from basic human realities like language, work and – in the broadest sense – human culture' (Mollenhauer, 1983, p. 1). Social pedagogues, therefore, need to be experts in such everyday life and culture (Cameron, Reimer and Smith, 2016), which happens not on the 'high, hard ground where practitioners can make effective use of research-based theory and technique ... [but in the] swampy lowland where situations are confusing "messes" incapable of technical solutions' (Schön, 1983, p. 42). In these swampy lowlands, workers find themselves 'alone again' (Bauman, 1994), struggling to make sense of the ethical complexity at the heart of much practice and with little to fall back on beyond who they are and what they bring to a situation.

Such a seemingly loose, intersubjective and interpretive understanding of knowledge and practice is at variance with the procedural and bureaucratic direction that social work has taken within a neoliberal paradigm (Lorenz, 2008). It cannot be accommodated within the 'scientific' and 'evidence-based' approaches that have come to dominate practice but requires what Cleary (2019) describes as a continual interpretive quest within a culture of human presence.

Theorising everyday practice

There is limited and only intermittent theorising, certainly in English, about the nature of everyday practice or the kind of knowledge (epistemology) that might support it. That which does exist tends to fall

back on the ideas of the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (see Smith, 1999; Flyvbjerg, 2001; Bondi, 2011; Jones, Lewis and Reffitt, 2013) and across particular fields of practice such as social work (Whan, 1986; Smeeton, 2017), education (Biesta, 2013), health (Kinsella, 2010) and educational psychology (Mercieca and Mercieca, 2018). In youth work, Mark K. Smith, in his excellent infed web resource (https://infed.org/mobi/mark-k-smith/), has opened up the kind of ideas I develop here, while Moss and Petrie (2002) challenge the dominance of technical rationality in working with children, identifying this as a practical moral rather than a technical rational task. In this journal Cleary (2019) draws on the work of Charles Taylor (1989) to advance an idea of the 'good', which might be traced back to Aristotle, while White (2007) has introduced the Aristotelean concept of *praxis* to child and youth care. However, these contributions are sporadic and barely impact the still-growing dominance of scientific and instrumental approaches to knowledge and practice.

Yet, if social pedagogy is to become accepted as professional practice and academic discipline, as is an ambition in a UK context, and if it is to resist pressures across Europe to become more 'evidence-based', then it is important that it is underpinned by an epistemology that will help make sense of the everyday nature of such practice. I seek to open up this epistemological discussion in this article. I set the scene by offering an example from my own recent experience that seeks to capture and exemplify some of the complexity of social pedagogical encounter, contrasting this with how present-day social work education approaches preparing students for the field. I then trace the emergence and consolidation of dominant technical instrumental forms of knowledge, which I argue to be ill-suited to everyday social pedagogical practice. This leads into an exposition of an alternative epistemology for social pedagogic practice grounded in Aristotelean ideas.

An example of social pedagogical encounter

Over the course of rehearsing my arguments for the article, I reflected on a recent encounter with a boy (now a man of course) whom I had known a long time ago in a professional capacity and with whom I maintain periodic contact. I knew he wasn't in a good way and had arranged to meet him at a specified place and time, but he wasn't there, so I phoned. He didn't always answer but on this occasion he did. He was at home, so I said I'd come round. I arrived to a house thick with cigarette smoke, as it always was. I was let in by a relative whom I had expected to be there, and walked into the living room, where I was introduced to someone new, sitting in pyjamas, although it was early afternoon. The man I had come to visit was in another room. He was in a bad mood – someone owed him money but had sought to palm him off with counterfeit. He was swearing vengeance. A spectre of loss and fear of further impending loss hung over the room. At times, I wondered if I picked up some sexual undercurrents in the conversation and dynamics. The experience overall was surreal, with moments of pathos but also humour, which had me on a couple of occasions laughing out loud. Throughout, but largely subconsciously, I was engaged in this interpretive quest that Cleary (2019) identifies, trying to make some sort of meaning of the situation.

In seeking to make some sense of what was going on, I tried to think of academic learning I had undertaken that might help me do so, but it was hard to identify. I thought of the social work students I teach. They would want to know what to do in such a situation. And, indeed, they generally work in organisational cultures that talk of 'best practice' or 'evidence-based practice', which encourages them to think that there is a right thing to do. Increasingly, this revolves around following procedure, which they confuse with – or perhaps imagine to be based on – 'evidence'. Students and more recently trained and socialised workers would want to know what their codes of conduct said; they might find themselves agonising over the need to inform the police over possible criminality; they might not feel that they could laugh, lest they were being disrespectful. They would, more than likely, want to do something – to 'intervene'. In reality, faced with such a situation, many would likely manage it well enough but would not see their presence in it as 'professional' or as reflecting any more widely accepted professional knowledge; they would struggle to understand that it was OK just to 'be' there and to remain curious.

As educators, we encourage such a state of affairs – or, at best, we do little to challenge it. We collude with approaches to knowledge that seek to abstract and have it stand above and be applied to practice. We ask students to break down their practice into domains of knowledge, skills and values, while on

the ground these collapse into one another. We set assignments that require them to discuss theories – generally drawn from academic disciplines such as psychology or sociology – to assess what might be going on in a situation, and other theories to inform how they might then apply these to intervene (and perhaps at certain stages of their development there may be merit in breaking things down in such a way). Students (and indeed many experienced workers) want guidance, procedures, rules, certainty. Yet, as Hannah Arendt (1979) attested, albeit in a different context, there are no rules for the unprecedented. And the fact is that just about every situation we come across is, in its own way, unprecedented. We rarely can and should not attempt to fall back on any notion that we have seen this sort of thing before and that this is what you do in cases of like kind (Ricks and Bellefeuille, 2004). Yet, this is where bureaucratic and 'evidence-based' ways of working take us – they lead us to believe that 'this is what you do in a child protection case', rather than 'these are some of the things you might consider in this particular child protection case'. The kind of theory-to-practice dynamic outlined above, which forms the basis of most social work education, is empirically and conceptually problematic and does not reflect the kind of knowledge that is actually useful in social work or, even more starkly, social pedagogical practice, where knowledge is invariably contingent – what is the right thing to do in any given situation 'depends' (Smith, 2012).

Rather than recognise this contingency, we seek to hide it behind the range of competences, codes, standards and programmes that are integral to the frameworks that circumscribe practice, all with the intention of breaking it down and reducing it to what are imagined to be its component parts. And, when such frameworks don't improve practice, as invariably they don't, we talk of a crisis in social work or in social work education (McCulloch, 2018). The reason for this crisis is not individual or even systemic; it does not lie with social workers or organisations or educators not doing their jobs properly, with a failure adequately to stick to the programme or apply the right theory or evidence to practice – it is, more fundamentally, an epistemological problem, situated in fundamental theory-to-practice gaps, which Longhofer and Floersch (2012) have argued 'are the source of social work's continual knowledge crisis' (p. 499). Before going on to consider an alternative way of thinking about knowledge, I first consider how we have reached the current state of affairs.

The Enlightenment's legacy

The origins of current dominant understandings of knowledge might be traced back to the Enlightenment, that period of scientific and philosophical advance that took place across Europe over the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, marking the beginning of the 'modern' period in history. An early Enlightenment thinker, René Descartes, coined the phrase 'cogito ergo sum', translating from Latin as 'I think therefore I am'. Descartes' thesis led to the assumption of a mind–body split, within which reason could be separated from and privileged above emotion. Immanuel Kant reinforced this idea of the primacy of reason in the human condition and his ideas came to dominate and have been incredibly influential in Western thought, to the point that they have come to define the (scientific) rationality that underpins the modern period. Social work is, in many respects, a child of modernity with its emphasis on logical positivist rationality (Sewpal, 2005) and rule-bound ways of working (Clark, 2000).

Over the centuries, there have been challenges to the dominance of logical positivist or 'scientific' ways of thinking and its implications for professions such as social work. The differing perspectives on social change offered by Mary Richmond and Jane Addams in the early years of social work reflect a tension between scientific and practical rationalities (ways of thinking and understanding; see Franklin, 1986). Richmond's casework model has, over the piece, proved to be more influential in the history of Western social work. In the education field, the American philosopher, John Dewey (1923) argued that learning required participation in community life. The psychologist Edward Thorndike, on the other hand, writing around the same time, proposed a scientific method of learning. Ellen Lagemann, an historian of education, has suggested that 'one cannot understand the history of education in the United States, unless one realizes that Edward L. Thorndike won and John Dewey lost' (1989, p. 185). Thorndike's supremacy in the education wars might be argued to have had far-reaching consequences across the Anglophone world (but also, increasingly, in Northern Europe), contributing to greater specialisation and

focus on technique in education and by extension in areas such as social pedagogy. This is evident in the quest for 'evidence-based' interventions (Whittaker, del Valle and Holmes, 2015), competency-based training programmes and in the proliferation of programmatic interventions (see Junker-Harbo and Kemp in this issue).

Recourse to technique or method has been reinforced in recent decades by managerialism, a political dogma that seeks to import business models around economy, efficiency and effectiveness to public services (Harris, 2002), including what might be thought of as 'people-professions'. Managerialism can be seductive, appealing to common-sense (but ultimately simplistic and misguided) understandings of how the world works. It is the pinnacle of technical rationality, looking to tools such as targets and key performance indicators while, on a related level, it has both spawned and been subsumed into regulatory frameworks that produce codes and checklists on the premise that we can measure quality by ticking boxes. This, as Biesta (2009) has pointed out, omits the evaluative aspect that underpins what it is we choose to measure through such frameworks: we can only measure what is measurable, and what is measurable does not necessarily equate with what is good.

The contemporary cultural fixation with risk has seen a doubling down on such reductionist ways of thinking about practice, education and professionalism. In times of uncertainty we look for 'hard' knowledge and equate this with being 'scientific' or 'evidence-based'. Generally, it is not science but 'scientism' – which Edwards et al. (2017) identify as the appropriation of scientific claims to confer a spurious legitimacy upon what are generally ideological or political positions – to which we turn. This is evident in child care in the faith placed in recent years in psychological and neuroscientific knowledge, evident, for instance, in the emphasis given to ideas of attachment theory (Smith, Cameron and Reimer, 2017) or trauma. This direction of travel acts to 'biologise' what is more appropriately social scientific terrain, offering 'the comforting possibility of simple solutions to complex problems' (Canter, 2012). Canter has gone on to argue that 'The idea that the brain causes behavior is easier to get across than the subtler and more complex explanation embedded in learning, interpersonal transactions and culture' (2012, p. 112). Yet, as I have argued, social pedagogical practice, by its nature, happens in cultural contexts within which scientific forms of knowledge are not always best suited.

Technical instrumentalism

Scientific and technical approaches to knowledge result in a particular approach to social work practice, what Sheppard (2012) calls technical instrumentalism, which he describes as a framework within which decisions are made and action taken on the basis of technical rules or procedures (2006). One might be led to imagine that these rules and procedures are based on evidence for what actually works or works best in practice. Even if that were so (and it rarely is) we are still left with questions as to the appropriateness of evidence-based practice for 'people-professions' (Webb, 2001).

When technical instrumentalism predominates, imagination or bending the rules to fit a situation is discouraged or, within an increasingly regulated landscape, punished. This has a conservative and foreclosing effect on practice (Stanford, 2008), which is not only misguided but can be dangerous. Following the rules might keep a practitioner or their organisation safe from disciplinary or reputational sanction but it can lead to seriously deleterious outcomes for clients. In one piece of research I was involved in (Smith et al., 2017), we were told of an incident where a social worker was obliged, reluctantly, to follow a procedure designed to keep the organisation safe, knowing that this was likely to affect the mental health of a mother who was about to give birth. It duly did so, leading to a drugs overdose: 'just following the rules' can be unethical (Bauman, 2000).

Problems with technical instrumentalism

For all the quest for evidence-based or scientific approaches to practice, it is hard to find consistent, replicable examples of their efficacy, certainly in child and youth care. There is no strong or consistent evidence of programmatic interventions being effective in promoting children's upbringing (Gharabaghi, 2012) even among its advocates (Whittaker et al., 2015; Hanson and Lang, 2016; Bath, 2017; Barron and Mitchell, 2019). Even in those rare instances where it might be argued to do so, the significance of such

interventions is secondary or at the very least dependent upon the role of the helping relationship in this process (Smith, 2015).

The difficulty in imputing consistent and positive connections between programmatic interventions and desirable outcomes exists because the assumption of a link is, in fact, conceptually problematic – it reflects a category error. Donald Schön, in his book *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), has argued strongly against 'technical-rationality' as an appropriate grounding for professional knowledge. Flyvbjerg (2005) put this even more starkly, arguing that 'The natural science approach simply does not work in the social sciences. No predictive theories have been arrived at in social science, despite centuries of trying. This approach is a wasteful dead-end' (p. 38). Bondi (2011) argued that the assumptions on which a technical rational model rest are particularly problematic in the 'people-professions'.

Direct social pedagogical practice is arguably more artistic than it is technical – it has to be experienced, felt and responded to at a number of different levels. Schön (1983) suggested that such knowledge is best understood as 'artful doing'. From a social work position, Bill Jordan (1978), likewise, argued that 'literature and poetry afford far more penetrating and meaningful insight into the human heart than psychological texts' (p. 25). Recognising the artistic in social work or social pedagogical practice requires a form of knowledge that goes beyond technical instrumentalism. This is where consideration of Aristotle's ideas offers a different way of considering the theory-to-practice nexus.

An Aristotelean approach

In his book *Back to the Rough Ground*, Joseph Dunne (1997), a philosopher of education, expounded Aristotle's approach to education and those of writers influenced by him. The book's title borrows from Wittgenstein and a quote of his prefaces it:

> We have got onto slippery ice where there is no friction and so in a certain sense the conditions are ideal, but also, just because of that, we are unable to walk. We want to walk; so we need friction. Back to the rough ground! (Cited in Dunne, 1997, p. xi)

Essentially, this quote conveys the difficulty in looking for the logical and linear journey from theory to practice to outcome that policy discourse would encourage us to believe exists. Rather, this journey requires that we negotiate the friction of value conflicts, different interpretations, individual dispositions, dead ends and new starts. But it is though this friction, uncomfortable though it may be at times, that we can actually move practice forward in a way that more accurately reflects how learning and practice development happens.

Dunne's starting point was to express his disquiet about the growing encroachment of technical approaches to teaching over the course of the 1970s and '80s. In developing his argument, he turned to Aristotle's central distinction between the intellectual virtues of *techne* and *phronesis*, which I come on to explain.

Writing in the third century BC, Aristotle (2009) was concerned with guiding questions around what is the best thing for human beings and what is a good life. This orientation and striving towards the good life and how to get there was, for Aristotle, the ultimate purpose (in Greek *telos*) of human existence and action. He called this state *eudaimonia*, which might be translated as flourishing or happiness (Knight, 2007). *Eudaimonia*, though, cannot just be measured in a material sense but is irrevocably social – we seek to flourish as members of society, aspiring to a common good. In an early but rare application of Aristotelean ideas to social work, Whan (1986) noted that 'Implicit in the act of service, of helping the other, is some version of the good. When asked to account for what one does, when asked to justify one's actions, it is to an idea of the good that we turn' (p. 244). Any idea of the good would undoubtedly include access to that which is required for day-to-day material comfort, but also to more relational goods such as friendship and affiliation, and to cultural goods such as participation and esteem (see Nussbaum and Sen, 1993).

Aristotle's virtues

Aristotle sought to locate the deliberation of what was good and right not so much within rules and principles, as subsequent Kantian approaches did, but within the character of a human actor. He made

the case that one reaches a state of human flourishing through living life in a particular way and through practising moral virtues such as courage, generosity, justice and gentleness. In his *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2011) he also identified intellectual virtues, three of which are commonly drawn on to explicate his view of knowledge. These are (from Flyvbjerg, 2001):

- *Episteme*: which is scientific or theoretical knowledge that is universal, invariable and context-independent and is based on general analytic rationality.
- *Techne*: which is knowledge that is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent and based on practical instrumental rationality governed by a conscious goal.

Techne might be thought of as craft knowledge, which involves making or producing something in a process that Aristotle called *poiesis*. *Poiesis*, crucially, does not require character or moral judgement. Flyvbjerg (2001) argues that we have spent too long in the social sciences attempting to apply *episteme* to *techne* (or, loosely, theory to practice), which – as noted above – he regards as a mismatch. And, as Bondi (2011) has noted, the model is particularly unsuited to 'people-work', within which character and moral judgement become central.

This leads us towards Aristotle's third intellectual virtue, that of:

- *Phronesis*: which is ethically based knowledge, involving deliberation about values. It is pragmatic, variable, context-dependent, oriented towards action and based on practical value-rationality.

Variously translated as practical knowledge, practical wisdom, practical reasoning or practical judgement, *phronesis* was what Aristotle identified as the most important intellectual virtue. While *techne* maps onto *poiesis*, *phronesis* is enacted through human action in *praxis*. *Praxis*, according to Carr and Kemmis (1986), has its roots in the commitment of the practitioner to wise and prudent action in a practical, concrete and historical situation and in conditions of uncertainty. It is not amenable to routinisation but requires an approach customised to pertaining circumstances (what to do really does 'depend'). Jones and colleagues (2013) described *phronesis* as the virtue 'that enables a practically wise person (a *phronimos*) to engage in good practical reasoning about ends (to aim for 'the right thing') and about means (to determine how to achieve the aim 'in the right way at the right time')' (p. 194).

Kreber (2015), crucially, noted that Aristotle's intellectual virtues exist in relationship to one another. *Phronesis* can't be reduced to mere common sense but also demands appropriate theoretical knowledge (*episteme*) and craft knowledge (*techne*). These operate in a dialectic interplay with practical knowledge in the field of *praxis*. *Praxis* is, therefore, action that is considered and consciously or implicitly theorised and which may, in turn, reflexively inform and transform the theory that initially informed it.

Knowledge cannot, from such a perspective, be straightforwardly applied to practice but emerges in and through it. Crucially, it cannot come from theory alone but requires that theory is augmented by committed moral action, both exemplified in and resulting in sound practitioner judgements. These judgements cannot be decided by external reference to rules, principles or theories, but require that the actor alone is the final arbiter of practice (Carr and Kemmis, 1986). This does not mean that actors are not accountable – they need to be able to 'show their workings' as to how and why they reached a particular judgement and took a particular action, through what Frank (2012) termed everyday *phronesis*. Such justification cannot be abrogated to procedural fiat but requires deliberation and good thinking. Introducing the social pedagogical motif of *head*, *heart and hands*, Jones and colleagues described how everyday *phronesis*

> calls into play relevant attributes from an ensemble of deeply ingrained and seamlessly integrated attributes comprising theoretical knowledge (knowledge of the head), practical skills (knowledge of the hand) and guiding affective dispositions or values or attributes or orientations or virtues (i.e. qualities of character or knowledge of the heart) in a manner that is appropriately responsive to context (a context that is frequently complex or ambiguous. It is the *phronimos*'s master virtue of practical wisdom, then, that enables the *phronimos* to call into play the relevant attributes from the ensemble of attributes and to conduct the whole ensemble appropriately. (2013, p. 194)

Implicit in this description is an acknowledgment that all practice is not the same, nor is it of equal worth or utility. A sense of discernment is required in order to distinguish the *phronimos* from less-skilled practitioners – again, this isn't scientific, but one tends to know a *phronimos* when one sees one!

So what might set the *phronimos* apart in this way? While their practice may appear intuitive, common-sense even, it is rooted in and requires what Gadamer (2004) has described as thoughtful reflection on experience. This is best thought of, according to Clark (2012), as a hermeneutical process 'demanding a repeated and progressive quest to reconcile the detailed particularities of the case with complex, competing and evolving moral imperatives' (p. 115). *Phronesis* involves good thinking and the ability to change understandings in light of changing circumstances. Because of its intrinsic complexity and ambiguity, *praxis* is always risky (Carr and Kemmis, 1986) – there is no textbook, algorithm or code that can eradicate that complexity. Even the most accomplished *phronimos* is likely to get things wrong at times, but will likely get them right more often than not. That is as much as can be hoped for.

An ontological dimension to phronesis

As should be apparent, the kind of knowledge encapsulated by *phronesis* isn't just practical or intellectual but is also dispositional and embodied. Kreber (2015) has noted the necessity not just of Aristotle's intellectual but also of his moral virtues of truthfulness, justice and courage in enacting *phronesis*. Dunne (1997) has highlighted that *phronesis* develops as part of a person's life history and experience, what Bourdieu (1977), harking back to Aristotle, subsequently went on to describe in his idea of *habitus*. *Habitus* might be thought of as the assimilated, embodied dispositions that give a person a particular 'feel for the game', allowing them to act wisely and with due discernment within a particular situation. Actions and responses become habitual because they are so deeply ingrained in one's character.

Phronesis, then, is not a matter of simply following the rules or applying principles, nor is it about the development of a skill; it involves instead the formation of a certain kind of person, 'a person disposed towards questioning and criticizing for the sake of more informed and responsible engagement' (Sullivan and Rosin, 2008, p. xvi). In this sense, *phronesis* and its enactment in *praxis* involves living in accordance with one's values. In so doing, an individual comes to embody a quality of authenticity (Kreber, 2014) through which he or she develops a 'fit' within the chosen field of practice. In social pedagogical terms this might be exemplified in the idea of *Haltung*, which encompasses a worker's moral stance or orientation and how they bring that into professional contexts.

Can phronesis be learned?

Accepting that *phronesis* requires and exemplifies particular character traits poses questions as to how or indeed whether a practitioner might learn to become a *phronimos*. Certainly, a *phronetic* orientation challenges dominant approaches to professional education based upon the belief that we can teach social work or social pedagogical knowledge, skills and values within a traditional academic curriculum, and that these can then be taken into and applied to practice. A *phronetic* approach points to the need for a different articulation between these elements. As we have seen, academic (epistemic) knowledge is essential. But rather than it being applied, it needs to be enacted and practised – it achieves meaning only through its testing and transformation in and through action in *praxis,* which involves the iterative elucidation of value-rational questions of 'where we are, where we want to go, and what is desirable according to different sets of values and interests' (Flyvbjerg, 2005, p. 42).

Returning to the scenario

Moving towards a conclusion, I return to the scenario I introduced at the start of the article and attempt a *phronetic* reading of this. Firstly, it was necessary to understand my role in the situation. For some, the very act of maintaining contact with someone beyond a current professional role would be considered 'unprofessional'. However, as Cleary (2019) notes, social pedagogical relationships recognise that clients may be dependent on professional support networks throughout their lifespan. This point is reinforced by the recent Scottish Independent Care Review (2020), which recognises the importance of relationships formed in care settings that continue beyond any statutory remit. What care leavers look

for in such ongoing relationships is recognition through everyday experiences, such as going for a coffee together (Halvorsen, 2009). I was aware of the kind of relationship I wanted to offer and wanted in return.

Next, I would stress that while I did not consciously think in advance of what theoretical ideas I might bring to the situation, how I approached and responded to what I encountered was informed, on some level, by a broad and deep range of theories and ideas. I was aware of the social circumstances of those I was with; how poverty and inequality had, over decades, eroded any sense of subjective wellbeing (Wilkinson and Pickett, 2009). I could imagine the sense of grief and longing for children removed from the care. I was aware that drugs and alcohol might be used to numb such feelings of loss and that, in straitened material and emotional circumstances, these might be obtained through criminal activity.

This might be thought of as epistemic knowledge up to a point, but how I drew upon it was tacit and habitual rather than conscious; it was there in the background, setting some parameters to my understanding of what might be going on. I also drew on other sources and types of knowledge. Because of my past with at least two of the characters, and knowing some of their histories, I could play some hunches, fusing horizons of past and present (Gadamer, 2004) to again give some insight into the situation. This allowed me to feel comfortable in circumstances that would otherwise have been experienced as surreal. But, although I knew the characters involved, I was nevertheless also aware of their alterity (Levinas, 1999) – I knew them but I could not really know them; the overall experience was one not merely of complexity (which implies some way of working this through to a solution) but of existential strangeness (Barnett, 2004) – of knowing that there were things going on that were just so far removed from my own experiences and frames of reference as to be beyond my proper comprehension. But I was comfortable, too, with my not knowing – there were things I didn't need to and perhaps had no right to know. But – and this perhaps is where an ethical dimension central to *phronesis* comes into play – I had a relationship with the man in question; he mattered to me (Charles and Alexander, 2014), and I felt a sense of responsibility towards him (Bauman, 1994). Moreover, the epistemic knowledge that formed the backdrop to my presence also provoked an emotional response. The ramifications of poverty and inequality on people's lives can – and, I would argue, ought to – elicit such a response . . . a combination perhaps of guilt that others' lives are so different from one's own and a desire to want to do something about it – a call to action – but what action?

In this scenario, I had little idea how I might help: what the man needed was more than I could offer in the context of the occasional cup of coffee and chat. So, we hung out for a bit (Garfat, 1999), went for a walk in the park and chatted – not in any counselling-type way; we just chatted – and after an hour or so I dropped him home, his anger slightly dissipated. He was at least able to laugh at the counterfeit money business. I have no idea what, if any, outcome might have resulted from our interaction – I certainly couldn't measure it. And, all the while, I was thinking of what I might do to offer practical help. In the moment, as much as I could do was to give him some money for cigarettes. But I arranged to see him again and to keep the connection live, which it is. On further reflection, I wonder whether there might be a slight twist in the tail of my account. While I might attempt to justify my actions as everyday *phronesis*, they perhaps also expose a gap in my knowledge at the level of *techne*. I was no longer in direct practice and had lost touch with the systems knowledge that might have pointed me towards what to do and who to contact to begin to address some of the man's underlying needs for housing, welfare benefits and medical treatment. I thought back to the care ethics literature (Tronto, 1993), which determines that care requires a level of technical competence to go alongside its relational and dispositional aspects. This gap in what I felt able to offer left me with what Bauman (1994) identified as the gnawing sense that one has not been moral enough. But that, perhaps, is at the heart of the journey towards the good life – the *telos* of human flourishing is not so much an end point as a journey, propelled by this moral impulse towards the good and the need to grapple with the means of how to move towards it.

Conclusion

This article adds to existing, if sporadic, attempts to introduce an Aristotelean perspective to professional knowledge, in this case to social pedagogy, the everyday nature of which, I argue, lends itself to such an epistemological position. Current dominant ideas of knowledge, which imagine it can

be abstracted and applied to practice, do not reflect the interplay of different forms of knowledge on the messy and ambiguous terrain on which such practice is enacted. This very messiness and ambiguity undoubtedly requires knowledge and ideas acquired from traditional academic disciplines (*episteme*); it requires some technical know-how and skills (*techne*) concerning how to take forward practical and procedural tasks – but most of all it requires Aristotle's master virtue of *phronesis* to draw together and integrate these other forms of knowledge within a sense of moral purpose in the field of *praxis*.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

References

Arendt, H. (1979). *The recovery of the public world* (A. H. Melvyn, Ed.). New York: St Martin's Press.

Aristotle. (2009). *The Nicomachean ethics* (D. Ross, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Aristotle. (2011). *The Eudemian ethics* (A. Kenny, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Barnett, R. (2004). Learning for an unknown future. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *23*(3), 247–60.

Barron, I., & Mitchell, D. (2019). The fairy tale model: Secure facility therapist perceptions. *Journal of Child & Adolescent Trauma*, *12*(2), 257–67.

Bath, H. (2017). The trouble with trauma. *Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care*, *16*(1), 1–12.

Bauman, Z. (1994). *Alone again: Ethics after certainty* (No. 9). Demos. www.demos.co.uk/files/aloneagain.pdf.

Bauman, Z. (2000). Special essay. Am I my brother's keeper? *European Journal of Social Work*, *3*(1), 5–11. [CrossRef]

Biesta, G. (2009). Good education in an age of measurement: On the need to reconnect with the question of purpose in education. *Educational Assessment, Evaluation and Accountability (formerly: Journal of Personnel Evaluation in Education)*, *21*(1), 33–46. [CrossRef]

Biesta, G. (2013). Knowledge, judgement and the curriculum: On the past, present and future of the idea of the practical. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, *45*(5), 684–96. [CrossRef]

Bondi, L. (Ed.). (2011). *Towards professional wisdom: Practical deliberation in the people professions*. Farnham: Ashgate.

Bourdieu, P. (1977). *Outline of a theory of practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Cameron, C., Reimer, D., & Smith, M. (2016). Towards a theory of upbringing in foster care in Europe. *European Journal of Social Work*, *19*(2), 152–70. [CrossRef]

Canter, D. (2012). Challenging neuroscience and evolutionary explanations of social and psychological processes. *Contemporary Social Science: Journal of the Academy of Social Sciences*, *7*(2), 95–115. [CrossRef]

Carr, W., & Kemmis, S. (1986). *Becoming critical: Education, knowledge, and action research*. Philadelphia: Falmer.

Charles, G., & Alexander, C. (2014). Beyond attachment: Mattering and the development of meaningful moments. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, *27*(3), 26–30.

Clark, C. (2000). *Social work ethics: Politics, principles and practice*. Basingstoke: Macmillan.

Clark, C. (2012). From rules to encounters: Ethical decision-making as a hermeneutic process. *Journal of Social Work*, *12*(2), 115–35. [CrossRef]

Cleary, B. (2019). Reinterpreting Bildung in social pedagogy. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, *8*(3), 1–12. [CrossRef]

Dewey, J. (1923). *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*. New York: Macmillan.

Dunne, J. (1997). *Back to the rough ground: Practical judgment and the lure of technique*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.

Edwards, R., Gillies, V., Lee, E., Macvarish, J., White, S., & Wastell, D. (2017). 'The problem with ACEs'. Submission to the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee Inquiry into the evidence-base for early years intervention (EY10039). https://blogs.kent.ac.uk/parentingculturestudies/files/2018/01/The-Problem-with-ACEs-EY10039-Edwards-et-al.-2017-1.pdf.

Fewster, G. (1990). *Being in child care: A journey into self*. Binghamton: The Haworth Press.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2001). *Making social science matter: Why social inquiry fails and how it can succeed again*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Flyvbjerg, B. (2005). Social science that matters. *Foresight Europe*, *2*, 38–42.

Frank, A. W. (2012). The feel for power games: Everyday phronesis and social theory. In B. Flyvbjerg, T. Landman, & S. Schram (Eds.), *Real social science: Applied phronesis* (pp. 48–65). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Franklin, D. L. (1986). Mary Richmond and Jane Addams: From moral certainty to rational inquiry in social work practice. *Social Service Review*, *60*(4), 504–25. [CrossRef]

Friesen, N., Savi, T., & Henriksson, C. (Eds.) (2012). *Hermeneutic phenomenology in education: Method and practice*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers.

Gadamer, H. G. (2004). *Truth and method*. London: Continuum.

Garfat, T. (1999). *On hanging-out (and hanging-in)*. CYC-Online. No. 8 (September). https://cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0999-editorial.html

Garfat, T. (2002). The use of everyday events in child and youth care work. www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-0402-garfat.html

Gharabaghi, K. (2012). Translating evidence into practice: Supporting the school performance of young people living in residential group care in Ontario. *Children & Youth Services Review*, *34*, 1130–4.

Grunwald, K., & Thiersch, H. (2009). The concept of the 'lifeworld orientation' for social work and social care. *Journal of Social Work Practice*, *23*(2), 131–46. [CrossRef]

Halvorsen, A. (2009). What counts in child protection and welfare? *Qualitative Social Work*, *8*(1), 65–81. [CrossRef]

Hanson, R. F., & Lang, J. (2016). A critical look at trauma-informed care among agencies and systems serving maltreated youth and their families. *Child Maltreatment*, *21*(2), 95–100. [CrossRef]

Harris, J. (2002). *The social work business*. London: Routledge.

Jones, M. L., Lewis, P. A., & Reffitt, K. E. (Eds.) (2013). *Toward human flourishing: Character, practical wisdom, and professional formation*. Macon: Mercer University Press.

Jordan, B. (1978). A comment on 'Theory and Practice in Social Work'. *British Journal of Social Work*, *8*(1), 23–5.

Kinsella, E. A. (2010). The art of reflective practice in health and social care: Reflections on the legacy of Donald Schön. *Reflective Practice*, *11*(4), 565–75. [CrossRef]

Knight, K. (2007). *Aristotelian philosophy: Ethics and politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre*. Cambridge: Polity.

Kreber, C. (2014). Rationalising the nature of 'graduateness' through philosophical accounts of authenticity. *Teaching in Higher Education*, *19*(1), 90–100. [CrossRef]

Kreber, C. (2015). Reviving the ancient virtues in the scholarship of teaching, with a slight critical twist. *Higher Education Research & Development*, *34*(3), 568–80.

Lagemann, E. (1989). The plural worlds of educational research. *History of Education Quarterly*, *29*(2), 185–214. [CrossRef]

Levinas, E. (1999). *Alterity and transcendence*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Longhofer, J., & Floersch, J. (2012). The coming crisis in social work: Some thoughts on social work and science. *Research on Social Work Practice*, *22*(5), 499–519. [CrossRef]

Lorenz, W. (2008). Paradigms and politics: Understanding methods paradigms in an historical context: The case of social pedagogy. *British Journal of Social Work*, *38*, 625–44. [CrossRef]

Magnuson, D. (2004). Preface. In T. Garfat (Ed.), *A child and youth care approach to working with families* (pp. xxi–xxiii). Binghamton: The Haworth Press.

Maier, H. W. (1987). *Developmental group care for children and youth: Concepts and practice*. New York: Haworth.

McCulloch, T. (2018). Social work education in Scotland: A (hi-)story in two halves. In V. E. Cree & M. Smith (Eds.), *Social work in a changing Scotland* (pp. 98–107). London: Routledge.

Mercieca, D. P., & Mercieca, D. (2018). Judgements on young children by early years practitioners: Working with phronêsis. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 1–3. [CrossRef]

Mollenhauer, K. (1983). *Forgotten connections: On culture and upbringing*. London: Routledge.

Moss, P., & Petrie, P. (2002). *From children's services to children's spaces: Public policy, children and childhood*. London: Routledge Falmer.

Nussbaum, M. C., & Sen, A. (1993). *The quality of life*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Petrie, P., Boddy, J., Cameron, C., Heptinstall, E., McQuail, S., Simon, A., & Wigfall, V. (2009). *Pedagogy – A holistic, personal approach to work with children and young people, across services* (Briefing paper). London: Thomas Coram Research Unit. http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/10000058/1/may_18_09_Ped_BRIEFING__PAPER_JB_PP_.pdf.

Phelan, J. (2001). Notes on using plain language in child and youth care work. CYC-online. www.cyc-net.org/cyc-online/cycol-1101-phelan.html.

Ricks, F., & Bellefeuille, G. (2004). Knowing: The critical error of ethics in family work. *Child & Youth Services*, *25*(1–2), 117–30.

Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.

Scottish Independent Care Review. (2020). www.carereview.scot/destination/independent-care-review-reports/.

Sewpal, W. (2005). Global standards: Promise and pitfalls for re-inscribing social work into civil society. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, *14*, 210–17. [CrossRef]

Sheppard, M. (2012). *Social work and social exclusion: The idea of practice*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Smeeton, J. (2017). From Aristotle to Arendt: A phenomenological exploration of forms of knowledge and practice in the context of child protection social work in the UK. *Qualitative Social Work*, *16*(1), 14–28. [CrossRef]

Smith, M. (2012). Social pedagogy from a Scottish perspective. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, *1*(1), 46–55. [CrossRef]

Smith, M. (2015). Therapeutic residential care for children and youth: Developing evidence-based international practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, *45*(3), 1073-6. [CrossRef]

Smith, M., Cameron, C., & Reimer, D. (2017). From attachment to recognition for children in care. *British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(6), 1606–23. [CrossRef]

Smith, M., Cree, V. E., MacRae, R., Sharp, D., Wallace, E., & O'Halloran, S. (2017). Social suffering: Changing organisational culture in children and families social work through critical reflection groups – Insights from Bourdieu. *British Journal of Social Work*, *47*(4), 973–88. [CrossRef]

Smith, R. (1999). Paths of judgement: The revival of practical wisdom. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, *31*(3), 327–40. [CrossRef]

Stanford, S. (2008). Taking a stand or playing it safe?: Resisting the moral conservatism of risk in social work practice. *European Journal of Social Work*, *11*(3), 209–20. [CrossRef]

Sullivan, W. M., & Rosin, M. S. (2008). *A new agenda for higher education: Shaping a life of the mind for practice*. San Francisco: Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and Jossey-Bass.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self – The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Tronto, J. (1993). *Moral boundaries: A political argument for an ethic of care*. London: Routledge.

Webb, S. A. (2001). Some considerations on the validity of evidence-based practice in social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, *31*(1), 57–79. [CrossRef]

Whan, M. (1986). On the nature of practice. *British Journal of Social Work*, *16*(2), 243–50.

White, J. (2007). Knowing, doing and being in context: A praxis-oriented approach to child and youth care. *Child & Youth Care Forum*, *36*(5–6), 225–44.

Whittaker, J. K., del Valle, J. F., & Holmes, L. (Eds.) (2015). *Therapeutic residential care for children and youth: Developing evidence-based international practice*. London: Jessica Kingsley.

Wilkinson, R., & Pickett, K. (2009). *The spirit level: Why more equal societies almost always do better*. London: Allen Lane.