Unsettled Social Work: The Challenge of Levinas’s Ethics

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Abstract

In this paper, I advocate for an orientation to social work practice that we might call ‘unsettled practice’ as a possible direction for moving beyond the separated discursive positions of critical and normative social work. Using the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, I make the case that unsettled practice requires us to regard social work as a practice of ethics defined by conscious and deliberate commitment to working in full view of the tensions and contradictions derived from social work’s professional status and knowledge claims. Levinas’s ethics represent a challenge to professional knowledge that holds the implicit claim of special knowledge of people. Levinas’s insistence that ethics must precede knowledge means that unsettled practice must take place on the ‘razor’s edge’ of totalising representations of people and the necessity of representation for justice. In this way, critical social work can situate itself in justice-oriented representations, but it can also interpret its chronic discomfort with normative social work as unsettled social work. ‘Unsettled’ means practice that accepts the impossibility of resolving the practice dilemma that the ‘violence’ of social work representations exists in inescapable tension with the need for justice that requires it. Consequently, I conclude that a space not entirely of social work knowledge enables ethics before practice.

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Introduction

Arguably, in the last thirty years, social work has faced critiques that make impossible any easy recourse to innocent altruism. We teach social work with an awareness that our profession bears the injustices of its foundational dilemma of the interpenetration of social control and help. Indeed, the very idea of social work is structured by historical and ideological forces that animate the normativity of the white, bourgeois, heterosexual subject. Foucault described the dividing practices (Rabinow, 1984) that structure and define paradigmatic identities through processes of exclusion that developed in concert with the rise of human service professions. More recently, social movements calling attention to redistributive injustices and identity-related oppression further contest and challenge social work practice.

With the insight that social work’s history produces the imbrication of both concern for the welfare of human beings and oppression and exclusion embedded in its very discursive structures, ‘critical social work’ developed as an effort to align social work with justice by becoming conscious of social work’s unintended complicity with injustice. With normalisation provided by the proliferation of journals and texts specifically devoted to it (Fook, 2002), the orientation characterised as ‘critical social work’ creates a distance from the discursive structures of the construct of ‘mainstream’ social work. The latter is associated with values related to professionalism and a less conflicted notion of ‘helping’. While the practical reality may reflect a greater alignment of critical and normative social work, the effect of the discursive separation from the idea of mainstream social work positions critical social work in a space that that seems not wholly ‘of’ social work. As a result, teaching and practising from a critical perspective can create uncertainty about whether one is indeed practising or teaching ‘social work’, and, worse, can result in ambivalence about our identification with social work itself.

In this paper, I intend to advocate for social work practice that we might call ‘unsettled practice’ as a possible direction for moving beyond the separated discursive positions of critical and normative social work. Using the philosophy of Emmanuel Levinas, I hope to make a case that unsettled practice requires us to regard social work as a practice of ethics defined by a conscious and deliberate commitment to working in full view of the tensions and contradictions derived from social work’s professional status and knowledge claims.

The ethics of Emmanuel Levinas can help social work to radically reconceptualise practice as ethics and thus to assist in identifying the tensions between knowledge and ethics that inhere in the conception and foundations of professional practice. Levinas’s insistence that ethics precedes knowledge has the potential to deeply challenge the relation of professional
practice and ethics in social work. I will begin by describing the thrust of Levinasian ethics. I will then turn to social work’s relationship to professional knowledge and I will conclude by arguing that unsettled practice repositions critical social work at the heart of a social work practice that places ethics before knowledge.

**Levinasian ethics**

I worked in a psychiatric unit of a general hospital during the early 1970s, during the fashion of family therapy. At that time, the star family therapists believed that unhealthy family interaction caused schizophrenia in young people. One day, a young man was admitted to the ward. As the social worker, I was assigned to do a ‘family assessment’. But, after doing the family assessment, I was puzzled because I found them to be quite normal. I was disappointed in myself, because it could only be my lack of experience and knowledge that limited my ability to find the problem. So I referred them to a more experienced family therapist for a consultation. Surely, he could find the pathology that had escaped me and thus enable my capacity to help the family with their schizophrenic tendencies. Looking back, I still feel horrified when I imagine the experience of the family as I tried to turn them into an exemplar of my knowledge.

This story illustrates the need to explore the continuous threat that social work knowledge, indeed any knowledge, poses to ethics. Emmanuel Levinas explicates the fundamental ‘violence’ that inheres in knowledge itself. Levinasian ethics is an important resource for the reconsideration of the nature and deployment of social work knowledge, including the sources of violence within social work help itself, as illustrated by my practice with the ‘schizophrenigenic family’. Violence extends from the effort to help by ‘knowing’ a person, a client, at the expense of her singularity. How did knowledge underpin my practice with the ‘schizophrenic family’ at the expense of an ethical response? What, in Levinas’s terms, is an ethical response?

Levinas was a Jew born in Lithuania and raised in France. He was a Holocaust survivor. Levinas’s lifelong work on ethics was his response to the catastrophic failure of ethics enacted in the Holocaust. Levinas was a student of the influential German philosopher Martin Heidegger. Heidegger’s turn to National Socialism and the Nazi party in the Second World War probably inspired Levinas’s essential question: what is the problem with knowledge and philosophy if Heidegger failed to grasp the evil of Nazism? He answers this question by insisting on the primacy of ethics before knowledge and philosophy. Levinas’s first book is entitled *Totality and Infinity* (Levinas, 1969). Totality refers to what can be thought and what can be said. Indeed, language itself is totality. So, logically, all of Western philosophy and knowledge are totalities. We think about philosophy, for
example, as explaining who ‘man’ is, or the ‘good life’ for mankind. In social work, our attempts to explain people, to make sense of our clients, belong to totality. For example, classical psycho-analysis is a total explanation of the psychic realm of people. It might also be systems theory, which predicts interactional patterns. In other words, totalities are the concepts we deploy that allow us to feel that we know or understand another person. Totality is our knowledge of others.

When we conceptualise people through our knowledge, assumptions and beliefs (totality), we are understanding people as extensions of the conceptions we use to understand. What I did to the family in the psychiatric unit was to treat them as extensions of my family therapy theory: to treat them as an instance of the Same. I understood my job in relation to the family, based on theory derived from outside my actual experience of the family—a practice that because theories are always generalisations, did not consider the singular, actual relation with the family.

Infinity, on the other hand, is the inexhaustible, irreducible singularity of people: it is what is outside the Same. At the heart of Levinas’s ethics is the notion that our representations of persons are always inadequate. Something always overflows, escapes our knowledge, comprehension, conceptions. Infinity is the acknowledgment of what is beyond comprehension. That overflow, that which escapes my conceptual organisation and thus prevents me from bringing the person into my conceptual system and making her my conceptual captive, is sociality rather than comprehension. While totality equates to the Same—all that is in our system of understanding—infinity is outside the Same, and thus gives meaning to the utter uniqueness of individuals (Levinas, 1969).

Persons exceed representation. This is the meaning of infinity. For example, let’s say we sit down to eat a wonderful meal. After eating, we can describe how good it was; we could try to describe the tastes and the textures and our responses. But we can never totally represent the experience of the wonderful meal through the concepts we use to describe it (Perpich, 2008, p. 63). Something always exceeds our description. The experience is more than we can think and more than we can say. This is how Levinas wants us to greet the other: with a conviction that the other person can never be fully known through our representation of him. Levinas is interested in our consciousness of that which cannot be represented, because he believes this is the site of ethics. The heart of ethics here is Levinas’s belief that the ‘Same’ is the ground of violence because when people are ‘understood’, that which is outside understanding—that which makes them singular—is violated.

The hallmark of Levinasian philosophy is what he calls ‘the face’. The face for Levinas represents the demand for response that is initiated in the face’s approach to another person. The face appears from a height, destitute and requiring response from the other (Levinas, 1969). The face is both a supplicant and a commander: it both needs us and demands our response:
The first word of the face is the ‘Thou shalt not kill’. It is an order. There is a commandment in the appearance of the face, as if a master spoke to me. However, at the same time, the face of the Other is destitute; it is the poor for whom I can do all and to whom I owe all. And me, whoever I may be, but as a ‘first person,’ I am the he who finds the resources to respond to the call (Levinas, 1985, p. 89).

For Levinas, the presence of the face and its demand for response are the start of ethics itself. But what is this demand for response and what kind of extravagant ethics is it calling for? And what is meant by the order not to kill? Levinas insists that the presence of the face initiates ethics because we are not free to not respond, even if this response is turning away. Indeed, our own subjectivity is contingent on interaction and communication with others. We are not able to not respond by virtue of the structure of communication itself. So, given the history of violence that marks human interaction and given that not responding is impossible, what is the nature of an ethical response to this stranger that might initiate peace (Levinas, 1999)?

Here, Levinas asks for something that jeopardises all of Western philosophy and knowledge. Our response cannot be to ‘understand’ the person (totality)—but must instead be an orientation towards that which defies our comprehension (infinity), thereby honouring the uniqueness of the Other. Diane Perpich (2008) says ‘The face of the other is the image of absolute alterity and unrepresentable singularity. It represents the inadequacy of every image to the task of representing the other and, as such, paradoxically, represents the impossibility of its own representational activity’ (Perpich, 2008, p. 69). I argue that the impossibility of representation that Levinas asserts must serve a conception of unsettled practice in social work.

The ethical relation

Sociality—not understanding—is the site of ethics (Peperzak et al., 1996, p. 7). Sociality takes place in the realm that eludes my understanding. Levinas insists that our knowledge of persons is always inadequate and that which overflows is sociality—my orientation towards that which escapes my conceptual organisation and thus exposes the Other’s utter uniqueness. To ‘understand’ another cannot be sociality because we are not engaged with the Other beyond what we already know. Here is our first inkling of the challenge Levinas poses to social work. The idea of understanding and conceptualising the Other is the foundation of the profession. Here, we have a glimmer of the radical challenge Levinas poses, if knowledge and conceptions are forms of ethical captivity.

We might demur, and say that we already know that good social work starts from a concept of shared understanding. But more startling, not
even shared understanding suffices in the ethical relation: ‘Before any participation in a common content by comprehension, it consists in the intuition of sociality by a relation that is consequently irreducible to comprehension’ (Peperzak et al., 1996, p. 7). The very beginning must be this maddeningly elusive ‘intuition of sociality’ before any comprehension that could lead to shared conceptions.

Levinas opposes responding to the Other as an extension of our concepts because he is asking for an encounter with the absolutely irreducible singularity or uniqueness of the other person. An encounter with utter uniqueness means that I must refrain from treating the other person as an extension of my categories, my theories, my habitual or learned ways of perceiving others. Indeed, I must refrain from seeing the person through any system of human thought because when I use my categories to ‘know’ the other person, I treat him or her as an extension of my knowing. This, for Levinas, is violence—even symbolic murder. For Levinas, the face of the Other looks at us and implicitly says ‘Do not kill me’, meaning do not kill my singularity by making me an example of a pre-existing conceptual schema. If you do this, you murder my uniqueness (Perpich, 2008).

Roger Gottlieb (1994) gives us the idea of the problem of comprehension of others as a problem of ethics bringing uniqueness into the Same. Here, we can begin to see how we can connect the problem of social work knowledge to ethics:

...knowledge of others necessarily reduces the other to something we possess, something we have acquired, and something—ultimately—we will use. If the foundation of our relation to others is knowledge, the other will be reduced to the same. Otherness will not be allowed to coexist with the agent of sameness (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 223).

This is very hard to think about because it challenges our common-sense ways of just ‘knowing people’. We might say that we can ‘acknowledge difference’, as social work has tried to do for years, but this does not solve the problem because even what is different pulls people into our already-made concepts of difference and sameness (Perpich, 2008, p. 188). Knowledge inevitably leads to forms of objectification. ‘Therefore knowledge cannot be the basis of ethical life—if we understand ethics as a concern for other people that is untouched by our own ways of seeing, our needs, desires, or attempts to control’ (Gottlieb, 1994, p. 222).

Murray (2003) suggests that ‘ethics is precisely an unsettling of one’s world by the call of the Other. For there to be ethics at all, ethics must come from outside the self. Otherwise, ethics is merely an expression of self-interest of community values’ (Murray, 2003, p. 5). Murray explains Levinas’s insistence that ethics begins with the Other. It is initiated by that which is outside us to which we must respond—the face. Again, this is a radical departure from any description of professional ethics, where ethics originates in the internal cogitation of the worker and is delivered
up to the client. If the origin of ethics begins with the client, and if our response must acknowledge the inadequacy of any representation, what could ‘professional’ possibly mean?

But what is this ethical relation? How are we supposed to go about allowing the presence of a stranger unsettle us? And, after all, the stance of the professional is surely to aim at knowing what we are doing! Yet, knowing what we are doing requires representation. Representation is our idea of who a person is, or the picture we form of a person. When we represent a person to ourselves, we pull that person into our system of concepts. Representation brings someone from singularity into totality.

So what is the importance of that which escapes our knowledge about another person? Ethics for Levinas is the orientation itself to that which exceeds our concepts and our ideas of persons—how we are alert to the inadequacy of representation so that we can always be aware that our concepts of the person make it nearly impossible, if not completely impossible, to be aware of her singularity. The process of representation shifts the notion of the person from who to what: ‘To represent the other is to begin the process that reduces her from a who to a what. It is a way of getting hold of the other, of exercising social control over her’ (Perpich, 2008, p. 191). Judith Butler (2004), in a similar vein, connects representation to damaged humanity when she says ‘a loss of the human takes place when it is “captured” by the image’ (Butler, 2004, p. 145).

What are we to make of professional social work, which exists by virtue of its capacity for special knowledge of the Other, when a ‘loss of the human’ takes place in the capture of uniqueness by professional knowledge?

Social work’s will to know

Professions are legitimated through the possession and exercise of special knowledge and this knowledge is associated with power and privilege (Healy, 2000, p. 72). So, on one hand, we have the valorisation of knowledge as the basis of legitimacy of the profession. On the other, we have Levinasian ethics describing the violence that ensues from capturing the Other in our knowledge schemas. It is at this point—the point at which social control and damaged singularity occur as a function of representation—that Levinasian ethics raises radical questions for social work. These questions jeopardise social work knowledge and practice, just as Levinas jeopardises Western philosophy.

What might social work practice look like? What are the radical implications of the deliberate ‘suspicion’ of professional knowledge as the basis of ethics in social work? How is the very respect we uphold as our most cherished value threatened by the professional demand to ‘know’ the Other as a condition of being a professional? To what extent does social work take place in an utterly unresolvable contradiction between
professional knowledge and an ethics of singularity? What would practice look like if it were constantly alert to this contradiction?

In other words, what could have been different if I had believed that my knowledge of the family with the schizophrenic son could not possibly represent the totality of that family? What if there had been room for noticing that which overflowed the theory of schizophrenigenic families? If I had had more belief in the inadequacy of knowledge itself, could I have done less violent social work? We are left with the hardest question about ethics and social work: How can I consider a social work relationship if ‘knowing’ people is ethical ‘murder’, in Levinas’s terms?

It is clear that thoughtful practitioners mediate between knowledge and practice judgements. Indeed, the substantial role of judgement in practice belies the brute application of totalised knowledge. Reflective and reflexive practices, for example, are underscored by ethics: they intend to resist the pull towards totality created by the superstructure of professions in favour of the crucial role of thought and judgement in practice.

However, a cursory examination of basic social work texts reveals the extent to which professional knowledge valorises and mandates ‘knowing the client’ as a special professional function. The widely taught text by Germain and Gitterman, The Life Model of Social Work Practice (Germain and Gitterman, 1980), serves to illustrate the special nature of professional knowledge. In a case example provided by Germain and Gitterman, good preparation for seeing a client is explained:

Before seeing Betty for the first time, the worker reflects upon theoretical issues such as the adolescent struggle with dependence and independence, the resurgence of earlier feelings toward parents, the preoccupation with self, the need for acceptance as a desirable person and the need for heterosexual and same-sex relationships; and social and cultural pressures on the mid-adolescent. She considers the strong motivational factors in the self-referral, and weighs the depression and such biological features as hormonal bodily changes and obesity . . . . She reflects, too, on the differing advantages of individual, family or group modalities, and of planned short-term or open-ended service (Germain and Gitterman, 1980, p. 36).

Here, the prescribed professional mandate insists on preparation as the mobilisation of knowledge before even encountering the client. This process is an application of two kinds of knowledge. The worker is enjoined above to scan theoretical knowledge that can be deployed to accurately depict the struggles of the client. Then, the worker must engage in a process of ‘anticipatory empathy’ that allows her to see through the eyes of the client:

To accomplish this task, a four-step process is suggested: 1) identification, through which the worker experiences what the client is feeling and thinking; 2) incorporation, through which the worker feels the client’s experiences as if they were his own; 3) reverberation, through which the worker evokes life processes of his own which facilitate understanding, and; 4)
detachment, through which the worker engages in rational, objective analysis (Germain and Gitterman, 1980, p. 36).

The utter normalcy of the above text is startling when we understand it as Levinas might: as jeopardy to singularity. The social worker mobilises a comprehensive knowledge of the Other that is formulated strictly within the social worker’s sole conceptual process. Here is the problem of ethics for Levinas: the moment of sociality—meaning the recognition that my representations of the client are wholly inadequate to the singular person—is ethics. Thus, ethics is threatened when social work deploys its incessant drive towards the intelligibility of the client. Ethics is not achieved by intelligibility, but by sociality—the moment at which we are receptive to the revelation from the Other.

Notwithstanding the reality that actual social work practitioners constantly mediate professional knowledge through reflection, thought and judgement, we can see the implied endpoint of totality in the explication of professional knowledge. Before even seeing the client, the ideal worker has decided on the theoretical frame that will organise her view of the client. And she has readied herself to become so knowledgeable that she will be able to actually incorporate the client’s feelings and thoughts as if her own. In other words, the client becomes an extension of the worker’s knowledge—even to the point of being a kind of extension of the worker herself. This is what Levinas (1969) insists is the symbolic murder of the Other. The totalisation of the Other—the bringing of her alterity into my Same—is thus the grounds for violence and exploitation. The ‘substitution of men for one another, the primal disrespect, makes possible exploitation itself’ (Levinas, 1969, p. 298).

Representation and justice

But how do we actually refrain from totalising, given that totality is not only what we can think and conceptualise, but is even language itself, as it embodies social construction? Here is the deep human dilemma: we cannot do without totality, because we need to have systems of language and thought in order to have justice. The idea here is that we have a cozy ethical relationship between the singular Other and me. I am having a fine time respecting the Other’s singularity. But what if a third person comes into the picture? How would I respect the needs of more than one person, especially when their needs conflict? ‘The appearance of the third opens up the dimension of justice’ (Simmons, 2003, p. 69). For this, Levinas acknowledges that we need language, knowledge, philosophies and systems (all totalities) to adjudicate conflicting claims and interests. We owe to the third what we owe to the Other (Levinas, 1998, p. 16). At a foundational level, we have to speak—and language is a human made
system. We have to judge. We have to have knowledge and philosophy that say what we ought to do under certain circumstances. In other words, in order to have relationships and justice itself, we need representation (Levinas, 1999).

Derrida (1978) makes the case that failure to represent actually opens the door to violence and injustice because justice itself requires thought, which is representation. For example, there probably is no better instance of both the need and the violence of representation than the use of the word ‘client’. It represents the history of dividing practices and the power relations of those practices. It marks professional terrain. It presumes who ‘knows’. It is a violent representation without which we cannot have social work. Unsettled practice requires such representation and at the same time struggles with its violence.

This brings us to the essential conflict at the heart of Levinas: to represent people betrays their singularity, but we have to have representation in order to have justice—in order to have ‘persons’ at all (Perpich, 2008). This means that we cannot do without our conceptions of people but our conceptions bear violence. So where does this leave social work if ethics is learning to live with consciousness of this conflict? I propose that contra professional demands to know, we require a conception of an unsettled social work practice that is committed to living on the razor's edge of the violence of representation and the necessity for justice and service.

Unsettled social work

Critical social work in its various incarnations has attempted to make conscious the impossibility of innocence in social work (Rossiter, 2001). But even this search, as a kind of repudiation of social work knowledge, does not in any way satisfy Levinasian ethics. It still rests on the idea of knowing a client, through knowing her as a victim of injustice or as an oppressed person. While such representations are necessary for justice, Levinas asks us to go beyond critical social work's critique of social work knowledge to the idea that ethics, as the response to alterity, is beyond knowledge itself and moves us into the realm of sociality—responsiveness that does not capture the Other in the Same. This sociality is ethics. Without it, we open the door to unintended violence to our clients when our social work categories, conceptions and theories about who clients ‘are ... potentially alienating [to clients] since socially ascribed meanings shape and misshape my self-understanding, open up but also limit my possibilities, and fundamentally make of me something that can be laid hold of by others’ (Perpich, 2008, p. 193).

If social work believed, following Levinas, that true respect for the individual, true valuing of the individual's dignity and worth can only come from appreciating the inadequacy and the danger of our representation of
others, then not even critical social work can solve the problem of ethics raised by this dilemma. Levinas moves us *beyond* critical social work, with its theories of justice and ways of representing oppression, to ethics itself, where our orientation to singularity must surmount knowledge.

Those who work and teach from a critical perspective do so with a sense of uneasiness about whether we really ‘do’ social work. In my view, this uneasiness about practice extends from the problem of representation in social work—a problem that Levinas brings to full consciousness. We know that we bear the history of forms of social control when we teach models of practice and that these representations are ethically problematic. We know at some level that the ‘dignity of the individual’ is compromised by the propensity of social work to mobilise ‘technique’ (Moffatt, 2001). In professional practice, technique deforms ethical sociality by substituting an instrumentalised professional relationship. Some of us feel somewhat uncomfortable about our uneasiness because we shy away from the valorised models of understanding, knowledge, application, integration of theory and practice, practice models, practice theories and the like. If we don’t teach or practise these things, can we actually call it teaching social work? Our stand in relation to practice seems less than ideally ‘professional’. Yet we have not heretofore named our uneasiness as a conflict between ethics and knowledge, so we have had no way to address the problem of our position ‘outside’ the profession.

I want to suggest that we must name unsettledness *as a conscious and deliberate practice of ethics before knowledge* accomplished by embracing the contradiction between the inevitable need to totalise or represent and the need to make space for the sociality that derives from our orientation towards that which is beyond comprehension of an individual. The unsettled razor’s edge of representation and ethics must be the space in which critical social work is practised.

This practice means that we cannot be satisfied in any way with performing practice models and practice techniques and that we must name our concern with the ethics of doing so. To remain unsettled is to shift our very understanding of social work from satisfaction with knowledge and technique to chronic alertness of its effects on ethics in order to enact Levinas’s warning that ethics must precede knowledge. To conceive of social work as unsettled practice is to present a radical challenge to the notion of ‘professional’ itself. Ethics cannot be a ‘competence’ or a naive appeal to ‘evidence’—it is a commitment to struggle with the vast historical legacy of totality—a struggle that requires constant judgements of the conflicts between ethics and justice.

What might practices of unsettled social work look like? Alongside social work’s valorisation of professional knowledge, social work has also proceeded with clear values concerning respect for the individuals and this value has inspired practice ideals such as self-determination, mutuality, relationship, listening, justice and care. We can draw from these resources
in social work to explore whether it is possible to move them out of the realm of professional techniques and towards spaces for ethical sociality. Here, I am attempting to indicate how Levinasian ethics may help us reconceptualise practice in ways that defend ethics and ward off the social work’s professional tendency to bring the Other into the Same, thus denying sociality.

Towards social work as unsettled practice

I think that Levinasian ethics works to move critical social work’s critique from a kind of political critique of normative knowledge to a claim that social work must proceed from ethics before knowledge. It deliberately situates itself on the razor’s edge of representation and justice in order to maintain ethics over knowledge. Infinity, sociality, singularity—words Levinas uses to describe what is beyond the violence of the Same inherent in knowledge—are different from political critique. They call for ethics first in the face of professional knowledge. In other words, Levinas helps critical social work to move beyond political critique and towards the central place of an ethics that demands that we learn to think and practise in full view of risk of representation to singularity. This means reframing critical social work’s refusal to fully invest in social work knowledge from the ‘you don’t teach practice’ refrain to a clear position that we teach practice as danger as well as opportunity. We temper our teaching with caution about social work knowledge in order to manage social work on the razor’s edge of knowing and injury. This is doing social work. To do otherwise is to refuse to negotiate the razor’s edge of representation and singularity. This is not a failure to ‘know how to practise’. It is an insistence that an orientation to singularity requires the distance that allows us to suspend assumptions, place what we think we know at risk and leave ourselves open to revelation from the Other: in other words, to place ethics before practice.

I believe that we have rich resources in social work from which to draw, but that they must be reconceptualised in terms of ethics before practice. The following three examples, involving listening, questioning and taking the Other’s perspective, demonstrate how social work practice strengths can be understood from the ethical vantage point of Levinas.

(1) The staple of social work practice, active listening, carries an intention towards Levinasian respect, but *absent his perspective on representation*, it can function as a technique that is administered in order to foster relationships and promote further disclosure—in other words, where active listening works instrumentally on the client and thus displaces ethical sociality and begins to institute our notions of what is good for the client.

In a Levinasian conception of practice, however, we might reconceptualise active listening as a practice that is accomplished by listening for that which challenges our preconceptions and our budding conceptions of the person. We might renew the idea of active listening as the activity of
alertness to all that is beyond our grasp, a desire to hear that which is not comprehensible to us, that which inspires our suspension of knowledge and moves us beyond what we know (Kirby, 2009). Then, we can listen with absorption to how the client or client system puts stories together, understanding that the client is in charge of the story and that the story is always a challenge to what I thought I knew and also to who I am. This is the enactment of sociality because it is aimed at disturbing our representations in order to avoid the use of instrumental means that turn the person into an object of knowledge and technique.

(2) Openness to revelation will also require that we practise without allowing the ‘answer’ to dominate the value of the question. Valorising answers extends from the need for expertise that marks the professional. Although social workers are excellent at the process of questioning, it cannot be understood as having the goal of answers that the question serves. We require a more robust justification for privileging the question as ethics in order to withstand the professional role demands that inevitably valorise answers.

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1992), whose work on hermeneutics bears sympathies to Levinas, unpacks the importance of the question:

…to question means to lay open, to place in the open. Against the fixity of opinions, questioning makes the object and all its possibilities fluid. A person skilled in the art of questioning is a person who can prevent questions from being suppressed by the dominant opinion (Gadamer, 1992, p. 367).

‘Fluid possibilities’ means that we refrain from closing revelation with the answer. Gadamer also says that ‘the claim to understand the person in advance functions to keep the other person’s claim at a distance’ (Gadamer, 1992, p. 369). The answer threatens to annihilate the possibilities of the Other. An orientation to unsettled practice means privileging the question over answers, so that we can guard ourselves from the seductive belief that the acquisition of knowledge, and therefore answers about people, makes us professionals.

Critical social work is an important resource for valuing questions because it asks us to raise questions about the representation. Such questioning of representation edges towards ethics when we ask about the nature of truths that become self-evident, about ideologies, about power and about the construction of the taken-for-granted:

- What is the nature of the language used to describe the client? Factual? Neutral?
- What opinions are disguised as facts?
- How does power work through the presentation of facts?
- Whose story appears in documentation and whose story does not?
What is the distribution of power between the client and the worker?
What work does assessment do? What does it build a case for?
How is the story an effect of social and political conditions?

Critical social work still does not give us a path towards ethical innocence. It exceeds the limitations of mainstream social work through justice-seeking critique, but justice and ethics are different. A certain violence inheres in justice because it requires representation. It gives no relief from the razor’s edge that is unsettled practice: the tension between justice and ethics that must be maintained at the expense of settling for justice at the expense of ethics.

(3) The foundational social work value of the dignity and worth of the individual can be seen through the lens of Levinasian ethics. Elizabeth Spelman (1978) speaks to the common-sense view that we all want to be treated as a person, by which she means that we want to be treated with forms of respect that are not simply respect for our legal rights or social conventions, but with a kind of respect for our person-ness or personhood. Spelman suggests that what we really mean when we ask to be treated like a person is that we want to be treated as the person we take ourselves to be. ‘We treat others as the persons they are just insofar as we try to respond to the way in which they choose to be seen and not through our favored ways of perceiving them’ (Spelman, 1978, p. 151). In essence, ‘being prepared to treat you as a person means being prepared to come to know the ways in which you are not like others’ (Spelman, 1978, p. 153). Here, Spelman implies an orientation and acute attention to how the Other reveals herself. By necessity, we suspend knowledge in order to do so.

Professional relations are burdened and facilitated by the myriad representations or models of others. The history of social work, from its indebtedness to Freud to the current investment in narratives, cannot help but represent, and, indeed, we must use such representations in order to think or conceptualise. But ethics demands that we privilege the constant effort to see the person as she sees herself as openness to revelation that models close down. So, unsettled practice is the search for the self-understanding of others and the need to work on the edge of that self-understanding and our professional representations. Good social work often accomplishes this, but it must be guided by ethics rather than technique.

Conclusion

An orientation to Levinasian ethics would mean we would have a much more humble version of social work knowledge and a much more fallible version of ourselves as social workers because we understand that there is no professional story that adequately represents the singularity of a
person. We then might base social work on sociality: the moment when we hesitate before we know and, instead, leave room for others to be outside what we know, beyond our reach, where we cannot lay hold of their personhood, thereby respecting persons, even as we are conscious of our own threat to that respect.

A conception of unsettled social work practice gives up the fantasy of complete comprehension in favour of an orientation towards the revelation of the Other. It means that we no longer look to any new theory or passing fad as the answer. Instead, we consider new knowledge as second to ethics: a resource for conversation, questions and self-discipline that grounds an ethics of sociality and generosity. In this way, social work can situate itself in justice-oriented representations, but it can also interpret its chronic discomfort as unsettled social work, which values its discomfort as a practice that fully acknowledges that the violence of representation exists in inescapable tension with the need for justice that requires it. A space not entirely of social work knowledge enables ethics before practice.

References