Clown-based Social Work as Dissent in Child Protection Practice

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Abstract

This article presents Clown-Based Social Work (Steggall, 2023) as a form of dissent consistent with Paul Michael Garrett's (2021a) conceptualisation of Dissenting Social Work. It contributes to the debate sparked by Chris Maylea (2020) and continued by Paul Michael Garrett (2021b) and Joe Whelan (2022). Clown-Based Social Work is an outcome of Steggall's, doctoral research findings. Clown theory is a relational practice that offers an alternative way of being with people in an impossible situation. Correlations between Clown Theory and Social Work Theory were observed and explored. These correlations were conceptualised into Clown-Based Social Work as a new approach to child protection practice. Three key concepts of Clown-Based Social Work are discussed as forms of dissent from established ways of knowing and normative familial ideals in child protection work: Failure, Stupidity and Play. These three concepts are explored as relational practices that can enact dialogue between service users and social workers. This discussion is both a response to what Maylea (2020) has called the contemporary failures of social work and to Garrett's (2021a, p. 226) call for dissenting imbued perspectives in social work practice.

Keywords: child protection practice, Clown-Based Social Work, dissenting social work, failure

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Background

Steggall's (2023) doctorial research project, *Clown-Based Social Work for Child Protection Practice: Transdisciplinary Correlations on Failure*, was driven by personal experiences of feeling 'stuck' as a child protection worker. This research embraced the Creative Arts methodology called Practice as Research (PaR) to examine Clown practice through undertaking clown training, devising, performing, and drawing to discover the correlations between clown and social work. These correlations were mapped onto social work theory to inform an alternative way of working in the child protection field.

The research adopted Kershaw's (2009, p. 5) definition of Practice as Research (PaR) as 'a method and methodology in search of results across disciplines: a collection of transdisciplinary research "tools"'. PaR is an approach located within a third category of research; that is the 'performative research paradigm' (Haseman, 2007, p. 150). In this paradigm, it is the symbolic data drawn from the creative practice that is discovered to find alternative or new knowledge; hence, it is qualitative and exploratory. According to Haseman (2007, p. 150) creative practice research '…not only expresses the research, but in that expression becomes the research itself'. Nelson (2013, p. 9; 26) explains that in PaR, the arts practice (e.g. clowning) is the method of inquiry and is submitted as evidence of research inquiry and new insights. The knowledge that emerges and manifested in arts practice is practical, sensory and ambiguous as it is both cognitive and non-conceptual, rational and non-discursive (Borgdorff, 2012, p. 49).

Maylea's (2020) assertions that social work has failed resonated with Steggall's (2023) sense of failure after working in the Australian child protection field for eleven years. The theoretical basis for social work is limited in its propensity to navigate the reality that service users lack self-determination in an unfair system; one which social work serves to perpetuate. These attempts have failed to achieve social equity or advances in social justice to help people overcome their environmental circumstances (Maylea, 2020, p. 776).

Maylea (2020, p. 772) states that social work lacks a logical theory base that navigates its contradictory aims. Leung (2012, p. 348) writes that social work theory is 'baffled by a basic dissonance, in its intention to help people accommodate to the status quo whilst challenging the status quo by attempting to bring about social change'. Social work practice is performed in '…a highly individualistic climate in which social problems are seen more as personal issues and clients are expected to care for themselves, with minimum government support' (Feldman, 2022, p. 760). Important to the individualisation of social problems is the dominant political ideas of Neoliberalism that emphasise the role of Government in welfare and community services. This ideology holds

that Government should not interfere in the lives of individuals, who are expected to be self-sufficient. Social policy that informs the sites and professional role of social work is dominated by Neoliberal ideals. A reality that has spurred Whelan (2022, p. 1171) to assert that '…social work is, effectively, a bourgeoise profession…with social workers functioning as "bureau professionals" …meaning social work itself mirrors the dominant ideology of the neoliberal state'.

The fundamental ideology inherent in Neoliberalism is that individuals are competing for wealth accumulation, family and safety on a field of equal opportunities for education and resources. Neoliberalism holds that those who lose, '…engender the construction of 'welfare dependence' as an addiction, lifestyle choice or simply the result of individual failure' (Morley and Macfarlane, 2014, p. 338). The vocational discomfort that emerges from having to compromise on the social work value-base and surrender to practice that effectively equates to being part of the problem is disillusioning. This is particularly so as managerialism infiltrates the neoliberal agenda in human service organisations where social workers are employed. Managerialism is preoccupied with high caseloads, bureaucratic tasks, accountability, risk and a framing of individual blame for social problems (Fenton, 2014, p. 324; Brockmann and Garrett, 2022, p. 888). Brockmann and Garrett (2022, p. 889) have found social workers have neoliberal ideals seeped into their attitudes towards service users contributing to a discourse of blame placed on the individual for the social problems they experience.

The tensions discussed by Maylea (2020) echoed with Steggall's, (2023) sense of being stuck as a child protection social worker. Practice 'stuckness' was the instigator for looking elsewhere, including other disciplines, for an alternative approach to child protection work. Whilst Maylea (2020) calls for a disbanding of the profession, Paul Michael Garrett (2021b), concurring with Maylea's argument, instead suggests *dissent*. Dissenting Social Work (DSW) is defined by Garrett (2021b, p. 1143) as a way that both resists the dominant hegemony and offers '…counter-narratives, imbued with a sense of hope…' (Garrett, 2021b, p. 1145).

This article argues that Clown-Based Social Work aligns with this vision of counter-narratives and provides a practical application of Garrett's (2021a; 2021b) conceptualisation of dissent, in the child protection field. This article outlines Clown Theory and Practice as it relates to Clown-Based Social Work before considering the three forms of dissent that both social workers and service users can practice: failure, stupidity and play.

Clown theory and practice

Clowning is a cultural phenomenon that evokes different representations and meanings (Otto, 2001; Davison, 2015, p. 14). There are many

cultural entry points to clown practice. Otto (2001, p. 34; 39) writes Jesters and Fools were historically a cultural phenomenon that permeated almost every culture. Steggall's (2023) research focuses on the European developments in clown practice, to concentrate on the three predominant conceptual themes (failure, stupidity and play), that can be mapped to constitute a distinct clown theory in the European tradition. These concepts relate to the figure of the European Auguste and Whiteface clown duo and have been explored by Jacques Lecoq's concept of the *New Clown*, theorised further by his lineage of clown teachers.

The Auguste clown became a cultural phenomenon in late 19th Century Europe, a popularity that reflects the prevalent social concerns (Davison, 2013, p. 68). In a time of desire for control and certainty, the emergence of a figure that represented a collective uncertainty may have acted as a social cathartic release. In the circus, the Auguste clown resists mastery of skills or tasks; instead, he is incompetent at everything (Peacock, 2009, p. 2; Davison, 2013, p. 71). The Whiteface clown is characterised by holding a stature of cultural competency conveyed by a sense of self-importance, high status and sophistication (Peacock, 2009, p. 2; Bouissac, 2015, p. 50). He performs *rhetorical excellence* to present himself as a dominant evolutionary figure (Bouissac, 2015, p. 56). However, Bouissac (2015, p. 56) explains that the Whiteface is a 'semiotic bubble', a ruse to trick people into believing he is sophisticated. The Whiteface and Auguste clowns were quickly formed into a duo from their inception, creating a circus act that rose in popularity and became the dominant form of clowning (Peacock, 2009, p. 4; Davison, 2013, p. 72; Peacock, 2014, p. 2). The pairing created the comedic convention of the high-status Whiteface in control and Auguste, struggling desperately to match the power and position of his partner (Towsen, 1976, pp. 214–223; Peacock, 2009, p. 4). Thematically in the evolution of the *clown*, the imbalance of status is both a source of play and an instigator for reflection on rules and power. Contradiction underpins the *know-how* of *clown logic* as a theoretical concept (Varro, 2010, p. 212).

The Whiteface and Auguste dichotomy, central to clown theory, is mimetic of hierarchical relationships; for example, Master/Servant; Major/Soldier or Boss/Employee. The Whiteface represents a ridiculous authority and will act with an uncompromising embodiment of ideals and follow the rules at any cost (Manea, 1994, pp. 36–37, 41). The Auguste is an ' … anti-authoritarian character … a voice for a reactionary, oppressive ethos … a voice for underprivileged proletarian culture' (McManus, 2003, pp. 15–16). Auguste's misunderstanding of the Whiteface's rules exposes them as ridiculous and creates space for criticism and reflection (McManus, 2003, p. 16). Tobias (2007, p. 38) argues that clowns are

inherently critical due to their inability to behave in line with social norms which leads to crossing defined boundaries.

The clown's boundary-crossing fuses disparate elements that are normally kept separate by social constructs. Consequently '…the basic assumptions, hierarchies and values of the established order that are upheld by the various boundaries are questioned, reassessed and subverted' (Tobias 2007, p. 38). *Clown theory* is generated through contradiction; that is, clowns counter the norms, rules, and behaviours of their social context, allowing for reflection and discussion.

The Whiteface and Auguste duo remained popular throughout the 20th Century, whilst clowning evolved. Davison (2013, p. 65) argues that the Auguste clown is crucial to present understandings of clowning and has '…come to signify "clown" itself'. The Auguste, or as he would become known, the *New Clown*, can disrupt the rules of any social context and undermine authority. In 1962, the pedagogy of the 'new clown' was developed by Jacques Lecoq at the L'École Internationale de Théâtre Jacques Lecoq in Paris. The pedagogy in the *New Clown* training involves the students finding their own inner clowns. Gaulier (2007, p. 302) explains that the clown is the student's '…hidden twin, ridiculous, comic, vulnerable and stupid'. Lecoq (2002, p. 150) asserts that 'the clown doesn't exist aside from the actor performing him. We are all clowns, we all think we are beautiful, clever and strong, whereas we all have our weaknesses, our ridiculous side, which can make people laugh when we allow it to express itself'.

Mele (2021, p. 8) refers to Lecoq's New Clown as the search for one's clown, an approach that was less interested in the make-up and costumes of the circus clown. Instead, he drew on the pedagogical developments of one of his students, Pierre Byland, who was more concerned with an internal clown that aims to feature the distinctive movement, idiosyncrasies, and traits of the actors themselves—the person (Mele, 2021, pp. 4–5). The internal clown is simply the person, exposed of social layers used to impress peers and social worlds.

Based on Steggall's Practice-led inquiry into clowning and reflection on the literature, Steggall (2023, p. 175) proposed the following definition of clown theory:

> The clown encounters problems as they fail to perform the intended tasks of an object. The knowledge constructed regarding the object is interrupted by the clown's failure to achieve the rules governing it. As the clown flops, that is they share with the audience that they are too stupid to solve the problem, they reveal their humanity. The audience laughs and finds pleasure at the clown's inevitable failure as the rules are exposed as false. The clown's stupefaction of the object enacts a state of not-knowing that elicits astonishment and discovery of the object as new, free of the conventional ways-of-knowing. The clown is then free to playfully discover the object anew, seeing it as malleable, an

> alternative meaning emerges, full of possibility and yet, refusing to be fixed. The object, the rules and problem are dislodged from fixed-logics and as such new ideas for solutions to the problem can be explored. The clown as open, vulnerable and willing, shares every moment of failure, hope and discovery with the audience. It is this journey of sharing that ascribes new meaning to an object and the ideas generated to overcome problems, not the solution, which is often ridiculous.

Five principles of clown practice were found by Steggall (2023) to correlate with social work practice: engagement, failure, stupidity, playfulness and problem-solving. As an act of transdisciplinary surgery, the research extracted the clown practice principles and transplanted them into social work. Clown-Based Social Work is what emerged from this doctoral process explained as a transdisciplinary experiment that builds on the propensity of clown theory to enact a relational presence that aims to connect, listen, and understand whilst moving between states of hope and failure. Seven concepts are offered as fundamental to *Clown-Based Social Work:*

1. Failure is inevitable.
2. It is possible to experience joy and pleasure regardless of failure.
3. Playful encounters are privileged over other case management or therapeutic tasks.
4. The social worker wants to understand the problems and solutions of the service user but never will.
5. Reimagine goals through discovery, playfulness, and dialogue with the service user.
6. Change may not be possible but a vulnerable and open acceptance of living as best as possible whilst inevitably failing may be achieved.
7. Anything is possible.

Clown-Based Social Work elicits a state whereby impossible tasks and inevitable failures can be rich relational journeys. Clown-Based Social Work offers an alternative way of responding to a social problem that resists and subverts the dominant or hegemonic ideology. With this conceptualisation in mind, this article considers how Clown-Based Social Work dissents from the dominant hegemonic practices inherent in the child protection field. Three key concepts of Clown-Based Social Work are discussed as ways social workers and service users can dissent in child protection work: Failure, Stupidity and Play.

Failure as dissent

Failure has a long history with Capitalism; a market economy will always produce winners and losers (Halberstam, 2011). The socio-cultural

obsession with winning diverts attention away from other pathways for being in the world (Fabbre, 2015, p. 146). Failure to succeed at leading a normal life offers an opportunity to ' … set alternative parameters for one's existence, however unproductive these may seem from a mainstream perspective' (Fabbre, 2015, p. 146). In the Child Protection Field dominant narratives for parenting draw heavily on Attachment Theory as the formative rules regarding whether children's brains will be hardwired for success or failure (Edwards *et al.*, 2015, p. 167). Attachment Theory contends that children emotionally and socially adapt to the care provided by their primary caregiver (in particular, the mother). White *et al.* (2019, p. 2) explains further:

> If a carer meets a child's needs for care and comfort in a sensitive and responsive manner, the child develops a 'secure' attachment, while unresponsive and insensitive parenting may create 'insecure' attachment behaviors in children.

The theory has been influential internationally among social workers working in the child protection field as a theory to support decision-making (White *et al.*, 2019, p. 2). Since its earliest formation in the research of John Bowlby, Attachment Theory has focused on the adverse effects of major child–caregiver separations. The emotional sensitivity of the caregiver is linked to the quality of the child's attachment, which is linked to their development and well-being (Forslund *et al.*, 2022, p. 3). In the child protection field, practitioners are required to form risk assessments and make decisions based on scientific evidence. The classifications that can be formed from Attachment Theory regarding caregiving quality and its impact on child development are frequently used by child protection practitioners (Hammarlund *et al.*, 2022, p. 712). The Attachment Theory knowledge base is so commonplace in child protection work that the range of 'attachment disorders' now frames the way ' … social workers think about the children and families they work with' (White, 2019, p. 63).

Garrett (2023, p. 113–114) warns that in the neoliberal emphasis on high caseloads and efficiency, the prevalence of fast assessment has resulted in conceptual shortcuts. Practitioners tend to classify attachment styles and parental sensitivity after only a few observations; this is particularly problematic due to the gendered and hegemonic coding implicit in Attachment Theory (Edwards *et al.*, 2015, p. 167). Attachment theory is criticised for its ' … exclusive emphasis on the role of the mother' for a child to achieve a secure attachment (Garrett, 2023, p. 112). Whilst contemporary scholars and practitioners semantically substitute terms such as parent or caregiver into Bowlby's concepts, Garrett (2023, p. 113) asserts that ' … it is still mothers—and more so if they lack income and are socially peripheral—who will be the targets of intervention … '.

Furthermore, Edwards *et al.* (2015, p. 178) argue that the dominant reason for secure attachment is the mother–child relationship and central to many attachment-based interventions is the notion that poverty is the result of the personal failure of parents, in particular, mothers. It is in this context that failure is seen as something to avoid, as it relates to parenting due to the possible irreversible consequences stemming from insecure attachment styles. Garrett (2023, p. 109) has additionally criticized the Eurocentric paradigm inherent in attachment theory, highlighting the appeal in international social work for more pluralistic practices. Clown-Based Social Work might offer practical means to decolonise social work knowledge from the Eurocentric clasp on parenting (Marovatsanga and Garrett, 2022).

Lane (2018, p. 68) proposes a Poetics of Maternal Failure that draws on her clown practice to '…disrupt entrenched ideas about failure in motherhood…'. She explores how the clown's approach to failure dissents from neoliberal connotations that failure is only productive if it is understood as part of the road to success (Lane, 2018, p. 68). The expectation of mothers to succeed in intensive parenting practices (eg. the sensitivity required to achieve a secure attachment) is impossible, yet failure is considered irrefutably negative (Lane, 2018, p. 69). The author explores further that notions of failure and success in clown theory are not opposed to each other, instead the clown discovers all the possibilities for success that exist within failure (Lane, 2018, pp. 72–73). Lane (2018, p. 69) explains a poetics of maternal failure:

> …Reclaims the experience of failing within mothering practices by recasting the relationship between failure and success, by examining the patriarchal and oppressive ways that success is defined in relation to motherhood, and, finally, by arguing that as mothers, we can engage with the creative possibilities of failure and thus put failure to work for us.

Clown-Based Social Work aligns with Lane (2018, p. 70) suggesting that the aim is not to avoid failure from mothering and parenting but to view failure as a site of creativity. *Unmasked failure and hope* are aesthetic qualities of the practitioner's positionality, attitude, and state but they also instigate dialogue. Failure is a dominant discourse in the child protection field: system failure, parents failure to protect their children, young people's fail-to-thrive and, at least according to Maylea (2020), social work as a discipline has failed to achieve its vision. Clowns also fail and failure is the bedrock of much of clown practice. The Clown-Based Social Work practitioner accepts and unmasks their sense of failure and the impossibility of socio-political realities. The concept of *inevitable failure* is not practised as a complicity with parental actions that put children at risk of harm, but rather an acceptance of reality. From this position of shared vulnerability, the social worker is positioned to

instigate participatory dialogue with parents regarding their actions/ inactions that have contributed to children being harmed or at risk of harm. This position of *unmasked failure* and collective responsibility dissents from the guises of individualism in child protection practices that view social problems as solely personal or moralistic flaws in service users (Feldman, 2022, p. 760).

Clown-Based Social Work extends on clown theory, the social worker is open, vulnerable and willing, sharing every moment of failure, hope and discovery with the service user. It is this journey of sharing that ascribes new meaning to parenting (and family) and the ideas generated to overcome problems. The concept that *inevitable failure* and the social worker's unmasked acceptance of failure enacts what Lane (2018, p. 79) describes as ' … a refusal to value success over failure'. This refusal is further dissent, opening the possibilities for joy and pleasure regardless of systemic and/or parental failure, which might even be viewed as a destination, rather than a cliched stop-over on the road to success (Lane, 2018, p. 68). Dissenting from the success narrative inherent within discourses of parenting and attachment allows practitioners and parents to reclaim ' … both the image and the world of mothering' (Lane, 2018, p. 82). Failure dissents from these neoliberal ideals for success. Hence, in Clown-Based Social Work practice, failure feeds and houses success, as Lane (2018, p. 82) suggests, arguing that in motherhood ' … the relationship between failure and success is marked by ups and downs, give and take, struggle and hope'.

Bere's (2020) hermeneutics of failure explains that the clown's contrasting understanding of the world reveals or discloses the tacit rules that govern the socio-political world. With the falseness of parenting rules exposed, through the vulnerable acceptance of failure, the practitioner and service user are now liberated to play by different rules and explore alternative possibilities for joy, pleasure and safety (Lane, 2018, p. 78). Halberstam (2011) asserts that failure ' … quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being'. Failure dissents as it generates new possibilities (Greteman, 2014, p. 428), does something differently, fails, tries again, searching for new destinations.

Clown-Based Social Work abandons the falseness of professionalism and reveals the person within the social worker role who has failures and hopes. The acceptance of failure is the recognition of reality and positions the work with the service user in the real world rather than in abstracted optimism. This approach accepts that the social worker cannot change the reality they are presented with. The Clown-Based social worker persistently returns to hope despite the failures they encounter; however, they never pretend that they have succeeded or ignore harmful parental action/inaction. They must always accept and acknowledge failure (Steggall, 2023).

Stupidity as dissent

Garrett (2021a, p. 201) considers how DSW perspectives might inform direct practice about how service users are '…situated in categories which classify, dominate and demean'. He argues for practitioners to hone a 'relational antennae' that resists categorisation of service users. 'It is wrong to "thingify" individuals to "dissolve" them and empty them of "substance" by forcing them into reductive categories' (Garrett, 2021a, p. 201). The problem of categorisation echoes the discourse of blame that is widespread in social work practice with parents involved in the child protection system. The categorising of service users as morally deficient and riddled with social problems makes different and *others* vulnerable groups.

Difference and otherness are equally complex ideas in child protection practice that rely on the legal classification of identity – 'an abusive parent', 'a parent with no insight', 'an abused child', 'mental health problems', 'resistant to change' and so on. These categories and descriptors highlight Munro's (2020, p. 42) argument that bias, in particular, people's reluctance to change their opinion, has a negative impact on child protection work. Ploesser and Mecheril (2012) discuss the problem social work theory has with the concepts of difference and otherness. According to the authors the classification of service users as different, and other, limits social work practice and solutions.

The problem with classification is relevant in the context of cultural practice, where the concept of difference and otherness is important. A key criticism of cultural competency is the aim of mastery and competence that assumes the ability to hold broad knowledge of multiple groups and further applied to the lived experience of service users in direct practice (Dean, 2001; Wear, 2003, p. 550; Kumagai and Lypson, 2009). Furthermore, the difference and otherness of service users as discussed above take an arrogant position of normality as white, Western culture and the other characterised as '…non-white, non-Western, non-heterosexual, non-English-speaking, and non-Christian' (Wear, 2003, p. 550). Ploesser and Mecheril (2012, pp. 800–801) argue for a deconstructive approach to otherness in social work theory to criticise heteronormative descriptors, concepts and knowledge production and query the way we understand otherness. The authors highlight the value of non-knowledge, emphasising that whilst knowledge is important '…knowledge about the other is neither innocent nor sufficient' (Ploesser and Mecheril, 2012, p. 801).

From this position, Clown-Based Social Work draws on a state of not-knowing to engage the world and enter discovery resulting in collective creativity and reflection (Butler, 2012, p. 71). Butler (2012, p. 69) states that clowns operate and exist in a '…state of "not-knowing"', a position that she describes as *counter-intuitive*. She asserts that *not-knowing* and

naiveté are foundational to what she refers to as the clown's ' … episte-mological imperative of awareness, curiosity, discovery, and play'. She suggests that the clown's state of not-knowing is analogous with Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, whereby ' … the not-knowing of both the educator and the student as crucial conditions for democratic learning'. The clown's lack of understanding can allow the audience to make connections and create their own conclusions and generate their own knowledge (Butler, 2012, p. 69).

The Clown-Based Social Worker's stupidity and naivety therefore al-low the service user to lead and inform the practitioner's own under-standing (Gray et al., (2021, p. 460). From this state of modesty, the person engaging with another resists explanatory discourse, allowing words to emerge from silence (Lecoq 2001, pp. 26–27). The concept that the social worker *wants to understand* the experiences of the service user but *never will*, speaks to how clowns explore and discover that which they do not understand, rather than seeking to classify and know. The Clown-Based Social Worker is open to any possibility, including remain-ing in the unknown. Lane (2018, p. 79) highlights perpetual learning that seeks the unknown and resists the narrative that knowledge has to be successfully known. Drawing on Halberstam (2011), Staśkiewicz (2021, p. 190) asserts that stupidity is a counter-intuitive mode of knowing that dissociates from Capitalist principles of success, however ' … not a lack of knowledge but a withdrawal from the restrictions and structures of hegemonic knowledge production'. Stupidity dissents from the hege-monic modes of knowledge production and instead searches for an alter-native way through the curiosities of naivety.

Clown-Based Social Work's notion of stupidity as a counter-intuitive mode of knowing aligns with international calls for social work practice to be decolonialised (Gray and Coates, 2010; Gray and Hetherington, 2016; Tefera, 2022). Laird (1998, p. 109) has proposed that social work practitioners should engage with questions that emerge from a position of informed not-knowers. She contends that we cannot know the *other* and the more we assert our pre-knowledge the more closed and fixed our understanding becomes, forming opinions based only on what we ex-pect. Laird (1998, p. 109) therefore proposes this position of an informed not knower who might ' … bring a wealth of expertise in asking good questions—questions that help to make more visible (both to us and to the "other") their meanings, as well as the sources of those meanings'. In child protection practice a dichotomous dynamic emerges between not-knowing and having a fixed expectation of what will happen. Laird's proposition of informed not-knowing (1998, p. 109) is a paradoxical merging of knowledge and stupidity that according to Dean (2001, p. 628) captures lack of competence important in cross-cultural practice. She argues that this position of informed not-knowing that motivates genuinely curious questions and discovery can enhance trust and

understanding. Practice that embodies a genuine not-knowing that does not manipulatively conceal or disrespect service users through dishonesty is challenging. Stupidity, as a form of dissent from classifications, listens and explores, before knowing and doing and hence enacts humility in the social workers' relationship with service users.

Play as dissent

Garrett (2021a p. 226) highlights that DSW is at odds with trends towards brain science approaches, such as mindfulness and neuroscience that '…may actually serve to obscure—some of the structurally generated problems confronting practitioners'. In the child protection field neuroscience has been promoted within scholarly and political spheres to argue for the notion of early intervention in the lives of children and families (Garrett, 2018, p. 656). However, the 'neuromolecular gaze' has been criticised for '…justifying gendered, raced and social inequalities, positioning poor mothers as architects of their children's deprivation' (Edwards *et al.*, 2015, p. 167). The uncritical acceptance, particularly in the child protection field of neuroscience as a hopeful path forward hides an interrogation of generalisations made by academics and politicians who have limited understanding of the working class or poverty (Beddoe and Joy, 2017, p. 65; Garrett, 2018, p. 662; 668).

Henceforth, several scholars have noted that the rise in brain science has coincided with the advance of the neoliberal ideology in social welfare (Pitts-Taylor, 2010; Wall, 2010; Schmitz and Höppner, 2014; Beddoe and Joy, 2017). One of the implications is that neoliberalism is using neuroscience to create an ethic of self-care and personal responsibility, whereby looking after yourself '…avoids being a financial liability to the state' (Beddoe and Joy, 2017, p. 65). Neuroscience has promoted an ideal neoliberal citizen who is educated, upholds good behaviour, has a moral obligation to work and manages family matters competently and safely (Beddoe and Joy, 2017, p. 70; Parton, 2016, p. 8). This ideal has become the dominant hegemonic perspective in the child protection field, which if not achieved must mean parents have something intrinsically amiss in their brains (Beddoe and Joy, 2017, p. 70; Gillies and Edwards, 2017, p. 19). Whilst neuroscience recognises the effects of poverty on parenting and families the connection is inversed so as to claim that certain parenting practices are the cause for poverty (Beddoe and Joy, 2017, p. 71).

As a result, the market-boom in neuroparenting, with books, courses and therapeutic models has become dominant in the child protection field as both explanatory models and solutions (or treatments) to problems. One such model that is prevalent in the child protection field is Dyadic Developmental Psychotherapy (DDP), defined as a treatment for

traumatised children based on attachment and brain science research ([Hughes, 2017](#), p. 599). This approach promotes an attitude of PACE—playfulness, acceptance, curiosity, empathy to facilitate ' … an open and engaged, intersubjective, therapeutic stance' ([Hughes, 2017](#), p. 595). The goal is to use the therapeutic relationship to reduce the impact of trauma through experiencing a new caregiving experience ([Hughes, 2017](#), p. 595). Playfulness is promoted as a means towards an optimistic future, whereby the child or young person is healed from their past and now has new healthy relationships. [Hughes (2017](#), p. 600) writes:

> Playfulness conveys a sense of optimism and hope for the family's journey forward together. It provides context so that the problems are not experienced in isolation from the routines and special events of daily living. At times it conveys lightness and laughter, looking for ways to experience and enhance the positive qualities of their relationships. This enables the child to experience a bit of happiness and companionship which she is going to need if she is to move beyond her isolation, fears, and shame.

The clinicians' use of playfulness so the child can experience *a bit of happiness* highlights the privileging of the more serious forms of therapy and healing. [Gray et al. (2021](#), p. 456) assert that serious therapeutic approaches informed by academic research, bioscience and healthcare, dismiss foolish and nonsensical ways of understanding the world. However, that which has been made redundant or irrelevant by the serious is what clowns embrace ([Gray et al., (2021](#), p. 456). Play is viewed as a relational tactic that is serious to children but not to adults. [Gray et al. (2021](#), p. 457) criticise the use of play in therapeutic practices:

> Play and pleasure are often used by clinicians as devices, tools, and tricks to secure the compliance of children towards realizing more 'serious' therapy goals or as forms of assessment … Games and rewards are also employed in treatment sessions to make therapy fun and secure children's cooperation … play and pleasure are seldom pursued or valued as ends in themselves. ([Gray et al., (2021](#), p. 457)

The brain science imperative to overcome trauma, when paired with neoliberal goals, reveals the underlying dominant discourses of the normalisation of social roles as productive citizens ([Gray et al., (2021](#), pp. 456–457; [Halberstam, 2011](#)). Clown-Based Social Work offers a counter-narrative to hegemonic notions of parenting and the therapeutic goals that aim to heal or change children and young people. Instead, we look to the frivolous, to all the possibilities for pleasure and joy in the here and now that are enacted through the accessible and low forms of play found in clowning practice, such as Grandma's Footsteps, Hide and Seek and Tag ([Davison, 2015](#), p. 3; [Gaulier, 2007](#), p. 187).

[Halberstam (2011](#), Low Theory section) draws on the notion of low theory to describe ways of knowing that are detached from ' … from

prescriptive methods, fixed logics and epistemes'. Hence, the playfulness employed in Clown-Based Social Work dissents from the prescriptions and treatments advocated for in the Neurosciences to resist being '… snared by the hooks of hegemony…' Halberstam (2011, Low Theory section). The Clown-Based Social Worker privileges play over therapeutic intervention, not to re-wire the brain but to discover the pleasure and fun in parent and child relationships. Viewing these not as means to an optimistic better relationship or more secure attachment, but valuable and purposeful to the love shared between parents and children. Snoek and Horstkötter (2021, p. 400) argue that parents '… play games with their children and make them laugh because that is fun and because they love them, not because neuroscience has appointed these behaviours as conducive for brain development'.

As an undisciplined practice, playing with parents and children during home visits enacts low theory as a mode of knowledge that refuses to know and instead detours and explores (Halberstam, 2011, Low Theory section). Playfulness gets lost, runs away, forgets, explores, listens, revels in purposelessness, laughs and opens dialogue in a manner that '… seeks not to explain but to involve' (Halberstam, 2011, Low Theory section). Playfulness puts children at the forefront of social work practice and views their '… curious, creative and immature play…' as '… a site of opportunity…' for exploring and discovering alternative solutions (Baspehlivan, 2022, p. 88). Baspehlivan (2022, p. 88) asserts that children are in a liminal relationship with their social world because they do not understand the function of authority and therefore resist, question and play with social rules and norms (i.e. maturity). This playfulness can result in resisting and exposing the '… limits of the authoritative and discursive structures in which they (children) are situated' (Baspehlivan, 2022, p. 88). Hence, playfulness can manifest a counterhegemonic theorisation of alternatives that dissents from adults and their mechanisms for hegemony to privilege the child.

Summary

Dissenting Social Work draws on critical theory, in particular Marxism to find a way for social work to wriggle out of the neoliberal clasp to which it is stuck. However, Garrett (2021a, p. 226) calls for pathways and strategies, asking, 'How might DSW—imbued perspectives impact on the way that practitioners engage with those having regard to services?'. The relational concepts and principles of Clown-Based Social Work offer a specific approach for direct DSW practice with families and children in the child protection field. Clown-Based Social Work is a way to keep moving forward despite inevitable and ongoing failure whilst remaining engaged in relationships with service users. Clown

Practice offers an opportunity to stop, fail, share, accept, and carry on. The dissenting concepts discussed in this article are a reflection on the limits of humanity and what is possible in an unfair and oppressive system. The clown *dissents* from established ways of knowing and normative familial ideals to focus on all the possibilities that might exist for joy and pleasure, here and now.

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