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# A CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERPROFESSIONAL WORK INSPIRED BY HANNAH ARENDT'S LINE OF THINKING

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## ABSTRACT

### **A conceptualization of interprofessional work inspired by Hannah Arendt's line of thinking**

In this article we investigate the relevance of Hannah Arendt's line of thinking for “interprofessional work”, i.e. when people of different professions collaborate. Arendt is well known for the distinctions she makes between labour, work and action within the active domain and between thinking, willing and judging in the contemplative domain. We discuss the relevance of each of these six human ways of dealing with experiences for interprofessional work. It appears that each of these has distinctive functions which are highlighted by another very important distinction for interprofessional work, i.e.

between “division of labour” and “cooperation”. The outcome of our investigation points in the direction of the importance of Arendt's concept of action for interprofessional work, on the basis of continuous discussion in order to achieve an “enlarged mentality” in this field.

### **Keywords**

Interprofessional work, Hannah Arendt

### **SAMENVATTING**

#### **Een conceptualisering van interprofessioneel werk, geïnspireerd door Hannah Arendts manier van denken**

In dit artikel onderzoeken we de relevantie van Hannah Arendts manier van denken voor interprofessioneel werk. Onder “interprofessioneel werk” verstaan wij de samenwerking tussen mensen met verschillende beroepen. Arendt staat bekend om het onderscheid dat zij maakt tussen *arbeiden*, *werken* en *handelen* binnen het actieve domein en tussen *denken*, *willen* en *oordelen* in het contemplatieve domein. Wij bespreken de relevantie van elk van deze zes manieren in het omgaan met ervaringen voor interprofessioneel werk. Uit dit onderzoek is gebleken dat deze manieren onderscheiden functies hebben die gemarkeerd worden door een ander, voor interprofessioneel werk zeer belangrijk onderscheid, namelijk tussen “werkverdeling” en “samenwerking”. De uitkomst van ons onderzoek wijst in de richting van het belang van Arendts concept van handelen voor interprofessioneel werk, op basis van een voortdurende discussie met als doel het bereiken van een “verbreed denkvermogen” in dit veld.

### **Trefwoorden**

Interprofessioneel werk, Hannah Arendt

### **INTRODUCTION**

Over the past three decades, interprofessional work, i.e. when professionals with different backgrounds and expertise collaborate, has been enhanced as part of a renewal of many modern welfare services, for example in health, social work and education. “Interprofessional work” can be understood and is practised in multiple ways (Frost, 2005; Miðskarð, 2012; Robinson, Atkinson & Downing, 2008).

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There is solid evidence from research that interprofessional work can often place heavy demands on the professionals involved, see e.g. Ejrnæs (2006), Frost (2005) and Røn Larsen (2012). One of the problems connected to this is that users (clients/patients/pupils) do not always receive the best possible service. We think that interprofessional work is demanding partly because it is unclear from a theoretical perspective how to understand what professionals actually *do* when they work together; furthermore, it is unclear what working together actually means. We do not find discussions of this topic in the existing literature on interprofessional work. This is what we will focus on in this article. We will explore the potential for creating a common and practice-based language for interprofessional work with the help of Hannah Arendt's<sup>1</sup> theorizations about "the human condition" and the distinctions in the six different activities she makes within this condition.

The application of Arendt's theorizations to a conceptualization of contemporary interprofessional work has been inspired by Pahuus (2007, 2009), who shows that it is beneficial to apply insights from Arendt's theorizations to issues in contemporary working life. Furthermore, our argument for applying Arendt's theorizations to a conceptualization of interprofessional work has been inspired by Dahl and Lykkeberg (2005, p. 10). They claim that because Arendt focuses simultaneously on individual and community, her main goal for our contemporary society is to instil ideas about how the modern, autonomous and enlightened individual may be realized in an increasingly demanding community with others, which we think also applies to the problems with interprofessional work.

In this article we will first briefly introduce Hannah Arendt and her line of thinking. Secondly we will investigate how collaboration is viewed in Arendt's six basic human activities of *labour*, *work*, *action*, *thinking*, *willing* and *judging*.<sup>2</sup> Finally we will define our conceptualization of interprofessional work as inspired by Hannah Arendt's line of thinking.

## HANNAH ARENDT

Hannah Arendt (1906–1975) first studied philosophy with philosopher Martin Heidegger at the University of Marburg. She then wrote her doctoral dissertation at the University of Heidelberg on the concept of love in Augustine's writings and was supervised by the existentialist philosopher and psychologist Karl Jaspers.

From her educational background it thus seems most natural to regard Arendt as a philosopher. But Arendt did not want to consider herself as such. Instead, Arendt unconventionally labelled herself as a "political theorist" (Arendt, 2013). This label tends to imply that Arendt is classified by

discipline as a political philosopher. However, we argue that Arendt is not a conventional political philosopher, as she frequently crosses over in her writings into other fields such as work studies, literature, and sociology; Arendt's works are therefore also frequently used in the following areas: work studies [e.g. Negt (1984) and Sennett (1998)], literature [e.g. Swift (2009)] and sociology [Bowring (2011)].<sup>3</sup>

Arendt's political thinking is a rather atypical form of political philosophy. It is based in the public realm which she distinguishes from the sphere of intimacy – the private realm – and the social realm. In accordance with Berkowitz (2010), we understand Arendt's public realm as emerging wherever a person takes the initiative to discuss a common issue in the company of others. For her emphasis on the necessity of a public realm, Arendt is famous for bringing ancient insights, in particular Greek philosophy, back to life in order to generate an alternative basis for modern society, which Arendt argues has failed due to the rise of many totalitarian regimes (Heller, 1988, p. 57).

The previous paragraphs demonstrate that Arendt's theorizations focus on a great variety of issues: evil, political living, the public realm, Greek philosophy and totalitarian regimes (the list could be made much longer based on her full authorship). However, in this article we follow Hull (2002) who claims that throughout her multi-faceted authorship Arendt has one main message, which is to stress the importance of people's plurality and interaction. For us, Arendt herself also seems to point out this central theme of people's interaction and plurality. Firstly, this is because she starts her first and best known main work *The Human Condition* (1958, p. 8) by citing two statements from Ancient Rome: *inter homines esse*, which means that being alive is the same as being amongst other people and *inter homines esse desinere*, which means that dying is the same as ceasing to be among other people. Secondly, this is because Arendt stresses recurrently throughout *The Human Condition* and her second main work *The Life of the Mind* (1978) that "plural people" are first and foremost supposed to live in community with one another on a common Earth, or to express it using a more Arendtian phrase: "Not Man but men inhabit this planet. Plurality is the law of the Earth"<sup>4</sup> (Arendt, 1978A, p. 19).

In the paragraphs above we have stated that Arendt's concern is with people's interaction and plurality; we will maintain this focus in our Arendtian conceptualization of interprofessional work. In the following, our vantage point for conceptualizing interprofessional work in more detail will be taken from the way Arendt defines the three practical activities of *labour*, *work* and *action* in *The Human Condition* (1958), and how she defines the three mental activities of *thinking*, *willing* and

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*judging* in *The Life of the Mind* (1978).<sup>5</sup> For Arendt, these six activities are activities that humans have engaged in throughout the whole of human history. They are rooted in very different, concrete human experiences that are still crucial for life in general and human life in particular.

The aim of this article is to conceptualize interprofessional work with the help of Hannah Arendt's theorizations. In the following two sections we will therefore investigate what kinds of collaboration are possible within the respective six Arendtian activities by focusing on the way in which each of the activities includes Arendt's main themes of interaction and plurality. We will then define interprofessional work following Arendt's line of thinking.

### **INTERACTION AND PLURALITY IN ARENDT'S THREE PRACTICAL ACTIVITIES**

In this section we will investigate the nature of collaboration in the activities of *labour*, *work* and *action*.

Arendt's activity of *labour* refers to the fact that people need to do certain things in order to survive as biological beings in their natural human bodies on the Earth – this involves all activities we engage in with and for our bodies. Arendt (1958, p. 107) argues that *labour* involves both toil and pleasure. In order to optimize the pleasure of *labour*, ancient people began to share their burden of *labour*, e.g. they cooked and washed clothes together. Because *labour* deals with cyclical matters, Arendt emphasizes that the collaboration is mostly based on a need to get things done in an efficient way in order to maximize pleasure. Arendt labels this form of collaboration "division of labour". In this collaboration people need to "behave toward each other as though they were one" (Arendt, 1958, p. 123). Division of labour is characterized by the idea that all people are equal to each other, which implies that all can carry out the same operations in a *labour* task.

Arendt's activity of *work* refers to the need for people to create a more durable world than the Earth can provide, as the Earth undergoes constant processes of change, for example due to harsh weather conditions and biological decomposition. The products of *work* are more durable and stable than those of *labour*. Arendt labels the collaboration within *work* as "cooperation/ specialization of work". Arendt (1958, p. 153ff) explains that when people cooperate, they produce a common product, but the *work* itself is carried out individually based on each individual's sovereignty. Therefore cooperation can be defined as implying that individuals in their

sovereignty use their different specializations in order to produce a compound product together with other people.

Arendt argues, however, that during the industrial revolution there was an enhanced focus on efficiency in *work* and therefore the quality of the products of *work* was downgraded. Arendt (1958, p. 123) argues that the decisive element in the industrial revolution was the introduction of the division of labour into the *work* activity in order to increase efficiency. With a focus on techniques and methods, each operation was simplified as much as possible to enable the use of assembly lines. Arendt claims that not only was *work* simplified, but that the industrial revolution also implied a shift from an interest in the products of *work* to the instruments themselves (Arendt, 1958, 294ff).

From the above, it follows that Arendt operates with an old version of cooperation which focuses on the product and a new version of cooperation which focuses on the techniques and methods used by the workers. In the old form of cooperation, people are different from each other in relation to how they are specialized to carry out certain tasks. In the new form of cooperation, people are different from each other in relation to which tool they can use.

It is crucial that Arendt stresses that *labour's* division of labour and *work's* cooperation are never used on their own. Both division of labour and cooperation use

... the general principle of organization, which itself has nothing to do with either work or labour, but owes its origin to the strictly political sphere of life, to the fact of a person's capacity to act and to *act together* and in concert. Only within the framework of political organization, where people do not merely live, but act, together, can specialization of work and division of labour take place. (Arendt, 1958, p. 123; italics by author)

In this quote, Arendt explains that in order to organize how people collaborate in *labour* and in *work* they need to make use of the third practical activity: *action*. In the quote, Arendt describes *action* as acting "in concert". We know that in a band or orchestra every player plays his or her own instrument, but real music only arises when they play together so that the sounds from their instruments blend in with one another in harmony. Arendt's allegory of an orchestra describes how *action* concerns how people act together from their individual perspectives. Arendt (1958) says that *actions* are mainly carried out as conversations. In these conversations people's plurality in their uniqueness is constantly exposed. Arendt explains that people's uniquenesses are rooted

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in each person's natality. Arendt's Augustine-inspired concept of natality refers to the birth of every individual person, which Arendt sees as the start of that person's uniqueness, implying that a person is never the same as any other person that has ever lived, lives or will live (Arendt, 1958, p. 175ff; Mortensen, 2008). But natality is not only found in one's birth, it is also present when one existentially inserts oneself into any given situation on one's life journey. It is important that it is only in interaction with other persons that a person's natality becomes apparent and emerges further (Wright, 2000, p. 155). Arendt argues that people's natality implies that every person is capable of starting something new and unexpected during their *actions* with other people (Hull, 2002, p. 15ff).

From our investigation of collaboration in Arendt's three practical activities, we can first sum up by stating that *labour's* division of labour collaboration form is characterized by all people behaving as though they were one coherent body, which implies limited scope for interaction and plurality for people as unique persons. Secondly, we found that *work's* cooperation collaboration form is characterized by people making use of their different specializations to produce a compound product. Further we discovered that cooperation makes use of people's plurality but allows limited scope for interactions. At the end of this section we concluded that *action* is characterized by people interacting with one another by using their uniqueness; hence *action* is an activity that is pervasive in interaction and plurality.

## INTERACTION AND PLURALITY IN ARENDT'S THREE MENTAL ACTIVITIES

We will now investigate what Arendt says about people's interaction and plurality in the three mental activities she distinguishes: *thinking*, *willing* and *judging*.

Arendt (1978, p. 90) says that we normally assume that thinking deals with abstractions, but she prefers to label such a process as working with knowledge. Her *thinking* instead "deals with *representations* of things that are absent" (Arendt, 1969, p. 446; italics by author). More elaborately, Arendt (1978A, p. 187ff) says that when *thinking* individuals temporarily halt their participation in active life with the purpose of *thinking* in solitude about their experiences with earthly matters or about their participation in *actions* with other persons. Hence Arendt's *thinking* is a reflection, whereas working with knowledge is a technical exercise.

In terms of the scope of this article, it is of special interest to consider when a person's *thinking* is initiated by participation in *actions* with other persons. Arendt explains such *thinking* in the

following way: "We first talk with others before we talk with myself, examining whatever the joint talk may have been about, and then discover that we can conduct a dialogue not only with others but with myself as well" (Arendt, 1978A, p. 151). Arendt proposes here that when a person speaks with other persons, this conversation urges the person to continue the discussion with him or herself in solitude.

A conclusion on the issue of interaction in the *thinking* activity must reveal clearly that it is not an interactive activity in and of itself. However, we can conclude that *thinking* often arises from *action* encounters with other plural people, and we may thus argue that an *action* continues in *thinking* even after the persons participating have parted ways, because Arendt agrees with Cato who states that "never is he less alone than when he is by himself" (Arendt, 1958, p. 525).

Arendt says that the person's two-in-one state ("me" and "myself") which is characteristic of *thinking* can also be found in the second mental activity: *willing*. However, she states that the nature of the two-in-one state of the *will* is totally different from its nature in *thinking*: "The split within the will is a conflict and not a dialogue [as in *thinking*]" (Arendt (1978B, p. 200ff) analyses how medieval philosophers rather unhelpfully incorporated the *will* into individual people. Arendt's suggestion for rethinking the *will* is to extract it from individual people and return it to communities of people. Similarly, Arendt argues for connecting the *will* more closely to our universal human condition of being plural people who inhabit the Earth together.

Similar to her view of the *will* as belonging to a setting of several persons, Arendt argues that *judging* is only possible in a setting with other people (Arendt, 1982). Arendt (1978C, p. 193) explains that *judging* is always aimed at particular things. Arendt says that by *judging* one places oneself at risk among others by saying, for example: "this is wrong" or "this is beautiful". The reason why *judging* belongs to a setting of plural persons is that we need other people's tastes to test and sharpen our own taste. By pronouncing our *judgements* to others and hearing their *judgements*, Arendt says, we can further sharpen our own *thinking* (Arendt, 1978C, p. 270).

From our investigation of people's plurality and interaction in Arendt's three mental activities, we can conclude that *willing* and *judging* contain a high degree of plurality and interaction, as they can only be executed in the presence of others. *Thinking*, on the other hand, is an activity that is carried out in solitude. However, we must not lose sight of the fact that, as Arendt states, the substance of *thinking* originates from interaction between people (*actions*) or from people's experiences with the earthly matters which they share with other plural people.



## **OPPORTUNITIES FOR THE CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERPROFESSIONAL WORK**

We will now sum up the outcome of our investigation of plurality and interaction in the six activities we discussed in order to consider our Arendtian conceptualization of interprofessional work.

We explained that *labour* concerns the tasks that we humans need to carry out regularly to survive as biological beings. We stated that *labour's* collaboration form, division of labour, is characterized by people working together so intensively that they behave as if they were one coherent body. Division of labour means that there is no difference between the people carrying out the different operations in a task. Hence division of labour is not relevant to our conceptualization of interprofessional work, as the obvious nature of interprofessional work is that people with different educational backgrounds collaborate in terms of their different skills and competencies. However, we find it crucial to stress that some tasks which need to be done in parallel with interprofessional work in the areas of social care, child nursing and health care will have the nature of *labour*; here division of labour is crucial for completing a task efficiently before the participating professionals in an interprofessional team move back to more genuine interprofessional work.

Whereas *labour's* division of labour is not suitable for our conceptualization of interprofessional work, *work's* cooperation collaboration form is highly relevant. The Arendtian cooperation implies that different people with their specializations interact with one another in order to produce a compound product. The ancient version of cooperation focuses on how people are specialized at doing certain tasks, whereas the modern version of cooperation focuses on how people are specialized at using certain tools and methods. Applied to our subject of interprofessional work, it is crucial to focus on how people from different professions each have their specializations according the ancient version of *work*, whereas the modern version requires us to focus on how professionals in the different professions employ different methods and techniques.

Regarding *action*, we concluded that it occurs every time people truly interact with one another, and also when they organize a division of labour or cooperation type of collaboration. We concluded that *action* is characterized by people interacting with one another while making use of their unique perspectives. Hence *action* likewise seems relevant to our conception, because the goal of interprofessional work in health, social work and education is to make use of the professionals' different perspectives to form a holistic approach to the people they interact with.

We stated that Arendt's mental activity of *thinking* is carried out in solitude, but it is crucial for Arendt that *thinking* always originates in something that has happened physically or something that was brought up in a conversation which had the character of an *action* activity. In short, it originates in a concrete experience. Arendt claims that after an *action* each person will subsequently have an inclination in their *thinking* to instil meaning to what their interlocutor said in order to draw out some lessons for their future actions in the world. Hence *thinking* seems crucial for our conceptualization of interprofessional work.

In the previous section we stated that Arendt's *willing* is an activity which needs the presence of more than one person. Arendt defines *willing* as referring to people embarking on common initiatives. Applied to our subject of interprofessional work, this implies that if several professionals work out a common initiative to help a person, then in Arendtian terms they exercise a common *will*. This activity of *willing* hence seems useful as a common goal-setting strategy for interprofessional work.

Lastly, we stated that *judging* is an activity that can only be performed in the presence of more than one person. When people *judge* they reveal their individual stance towards an issue to one another. Hence, every time individual professionals in interprofessional work reveal a stance on an issue they are making a *judgement*. In our conceptualization we will refer to *judging* as a component of what happens when professionals engage in *actions*.

## **CONCLUSION ON AN ARENDTIAN CONCEPTUALIZATION OF INTERPROFESSIONAL WORK**

For our conclusion on an Arendtian conceptualization of interprofessional work, first of all we wish to emphasize that some tasks in the areas of health, social work and education will be categorized as *labour*. *Labour* refers to how people take care of bodily needs. From Arendt's theorizations it is important to stress that these tasks are best carried out through a division of labour. This form of collaboration is not an interprofessional work form, but a shared workload, because it emphasizes that all people are basically equal in carrying out the component operations in a task. However, this does not mean that everybody performs the same operations, but that different people's operations are performed by one coherent body. This means that if one person is behind in his or her operation, then the next person will help this person for a while. The central point is that all professionals can share the operations which need to be carried out in a *labour* task; therefore all professionals can execute these *labour* tasks. However, it may be wise in some

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situations to exempt certain individuals from some *labour* tasks, so that they can apply their special expertise that the interprofessional team is waiting for in order to reach their common goal.

In order to conceptualize interprofessional work itself, Arendt's theorizations inspire us to define it in two modes: cooperation and *action*.

In the cooperation mode the various professionals contribute by applying their specializations in order to complete a common task. It is in this collaboration that the professionals can make the most effective use of their professional skills and competencies, for their expertise is based on education and work experience. Following Arendt's investigation of cooperation, we recommend that the professionals' specializations should be defined by the nature of the work carried out rather than the tools and methods used. Even though we emphasize that cooperation is an interprofessional mode of work, we want to stress that cooperation is always organized as part of an *action* activity. Furthermore, all proper communication in interprofessional work is an *action* activity. Hence the Arendtian *action* activity is most crucial for our conceptualization of interprofessional work.

Arendtian *action* activities are defined as situations in which various professionals take a unique stance on a common issue – or in Arendtian terms, they reveal their *judgements* to one another. Of course when we zoom in on interprofessional work, we see that the professionals draw upon their profession to adopt a stance, but in an *action* it is important to zoom in on how the individuals use their uniqueness together with their professional competencies and experience to adopt a stance.

The individuals' uniquenesses come together in the *action*. It is crucial that the participating professionals regard each other as equal partners, although they must resist the temptation to adopt the same perspective on the issues being discussed. Rather, each professional needs to strive to maintain an authentic perspective on the issues. Being authentic means that professionals refine their perspectives by correcting errors and distortions, and that they speak as honestly as possible about how they view the issues. Furthermore, they need to try to understand their interlocutor's perspectives (Miðskarð, 2012).

Following such activity the people involved need to try to use their representations of the other's perspective to conduct a *thinking* with themselves in solitude. In this *thinking* it is crucial that one does not see oneself as one of the other individuals involved in the *action*. Rather one needs to be able to see oneself from the other's perspective. When a person makes use of the representation of

the other's perspectives in the dialogue with him or herself, that person will inevitably enlarge his or her own perspective on the issues being discussed (Arendt, 1978C, p. 257).

According to Arendt, we as humans perform best when we constantly alternate between *actions* and *thinking*. In interprofessional work, we recommend that time should be devoted to both of these activities. In *actions* the professionals need to try to understand each other's perspectives. Following *actions* it is crucial to allow time for individual *thinking*. However, it is important that the professionals re-unite to make decisions together following *thinking*. They need to develop a common *will*, so that individual professionals or professional interests do not overrule a common effort and damage others involved in the process.

At the start of this article we set out the goal of theoretically investigating what professionals do when they engage in interprofessional work, and furthermore what interprofessional work actually means. By applying Arendt's six activities of *labour*, *work*, *action*, *willing*, *judging* and *thinking* we can conclude that professionals perform and *must* perform many different activities in interprofessional work. Some of these activities have more to do with *labour* (bodily-oriented activities) and *work* (producing things) than with *actions* that are more oriented towards authentic and open-minded interactions with clients/patients/pupils. However, we can conclude that the core activities are *action*, cooperation (in which the different professions are activated) and *thinking* (in which the professionals reflect following an *action*). On the basis of these findings, further research might be done into the development of what we called a "common and practice-based language".

## NOTES

- 1 Hannah Arendt is probably best known for her concept of the banality of evil which she developed in connection with her observation of the Eichmann trial (Arendt, 1963). Briefly explained, the banality of evil refers to the fact that individuals can perform evil deeds without being truly aware of what they are doing. The explanation for this is that one can blindly follow the ideas of a system instead of living politically, which means making use of one's lived experiences with fellow human beings.
- 2 Because Arendt defines these commonly used terms in her own unique way, we have chosen to italicize these Arendtian terms every time we use them.
- 3 In recent decades Arendt's works have also been studied and used within many other disciplines than those mentioned here. For example, her writings are currently being increasingly introduced

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into the fields of social work (e.g. Froggett, 2002; Stivers, 2008) and educational studies (e.g. Berding, 2009; Biesta, 2010; Gordon, 2001).

4 Arendt's term "men" refers to both males and females.

5 *Judging* is not part of *The Life of the Mind*. It was a projected third part, but Arendt died before she could work on it. Hence when writing about Arendt's ideas on *judging* we have used material from Arendt's lectures on Kant's political philosophy (Arendt, 1982), in which she touches upon the issue of *judging*.

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