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The Practical Realities of Ecosocial Work: A Review of the Literature

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Abstract

The following article examines contemporary literary opinion on the link between social and environmental justice. It argues that social work's historical adherence to the notion of person-in-environment that is, person-in-social environment, has meant that environmental justice has not been widely realised in practice. Literature is drawn on to highlight the link between social and environmental justice and the relevance of environmental justice to social work practice. The author calls for additional debate on the merit of social work practice that realises the link between social and environmental justice and moreover, further research into how this link can be realised in practice.

Literature

A review of the literature indicated that recent admirable attempts have been made to broaden the concept of person-in-environment in social work. Environmental issues are increasingly acknowledged as a concern for the social work profession. The literature reviewed however significantly lacked pragmatic suggestions on how to apply environmental or eco social work in practice and few studies appeared to have explored its practical realities. Significantly, several articles acknowledged the reluctance of the profession to modify its practice orientation to engage in environmental justice (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006; Zapf, 2005a; Zapf, 2005b) and others questioned the actual practicability of an ecocentric practice in social work (Besthorn, 2003; Ungar, 2002). Additional research into the how of ecosocial work is imperative not least to assist in propelling environmental justice into mainstream social work but also to support its evolution into evidence based practice.

Methodology

Criteria for inclusion and exclusion of studies in the review

The literature search intended to locate material that explored practical ecocentric approaches to social work within the last 10 years. A search of the literature using "social work" and "eco" or "ecology" as search criteria in journal databases ProQuest 5000, SAGE Premier 2007 and InformaWorld and the Google Scholar search engine yielded limited results and scarce Australian literature. Consequently, this review contains international material and information

obtained from the Global Alliance for a Deep Ecological Social Work website. Additionally, two books composed by social workers and relevant to the topic were also included in the review.

In an effort to contextualise social work literature within broader literary opinion on the topic, material composed by authors from non-social work disciplines was also included in the review. Material was further sourced from the reference lists of articles originally obtained from journal databases. Of the 21 pieces of literature referenced, 19 were descriptive; only two empirical studies were included in the review.

Applications for practice

Defining ecosocial work

Overwhelmingly, the literature acknowledged the historically shallow relationship endorsed by the social work profession between humans and the natural realm. Ungar (2002) contended that it has only been since the 1970s that the profession has engaged in critical dialogue about the fundamental relationship between the abuse of the natural environment and consequent social injustice. Coates' (2003a, 2004) writings appeared to most prominently explore social work's origins in modernism challenging, along with others, its acceptance of modernity's abstracted perception of the natural environment (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006). The environment in social work has traditionally been constructed within a socio/cultural context (Besthorn, 2003; Zapf, 2005a; Zapf, 2005b). However, an ecocentric approach to social work encapsulates a more holistic understanding of environment by means of developing "a new ethic in social work and an expansion of social work values to include a global ecological perspective" (Marlow & van Rooyen, 2001, p. 243). Consequently, the notion of person-in-environment that has been central to the social work discourse evolves to encompass the "interdependence and relatedness of all life, connectedness with nature and the importance of place" (Coates et al., 2006, p. 8).

Environmental sustainability: a social work issue?

According to Coates (2004), "environmental destruction like social injustice is a societal problem resulting from values and beliefs that are inherent in the structure of modern society" (p. 3). Besthorn (2002) furthered this thought via an examination of the natural world as other; a commodity with which to exploit and manage for human profit.

A consensual theme permeated the literature concerning a perilous future for the earth and her inhabitants to the extent that much of the social work profession agreed it can no longer maintain a narrow view of ecological approaches to practice. Hillman (2002) proposed that the growth in the number of environmental non-government organizations is indicative of the worldwide impact of the environmental crisis (p. 350). Elgin (as cited in Muldoon, 2006) suggested "the entire human population is confronted with a common predicament whose solution will require us to work together" (p. 11). The concepts of ecology and sustainability are clearly finding their way into the social work discourse as social workers increasingly encounter

the consequences of environmental contamination and degradation in their practice (Muldoon, 2006).

Keefe (2003) and Muldoon (2006) challenged the temporal relevance of ecosocial work. They acknowledged that although “the threads linking environmental pollution and social welfare stand much more exposed under extreme conditions” (Bolan, as cited by Muldoon, 2006, p. 146), the profession must broaden its interest for the entire population experiencing similar afflictions under parallel policies. Environmental injustice is a fundamental and perpetual concern for social work.

The link between social and environmental justice

Significant attention was paid to the interdependence of the human and natural worlds. The link between social and environmental justice was starkly drawn (Besthorn, 2002; Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2000; Hillman, 2002; Keefe, 2003; Marlow & Rooyen, 2001; McKinnon, 2001; Muldoon, 2006) and environmental racism with its obvious disproportionate social implications on the 'outcasts of the great banquet of consumerism' (Coates 2000, p. 4) was identified as a significant concern for social work (Hillman, 2002; Keefe, 2003; McKinnon, 2001; Muldoon, 2006). Besthorn (2002; 2003) emphasized the connection between environmental ruin and individual, economic and political volatility and highlighted the association between human health and ecosystem health. Similarly, McKinnon (2001) stated that the ecological crisis could not be separated from current social and political issues. And, according to Muldoon (2006), “attempts to improve social conditions may be lost if society itself lacks clean air, drinkable water and adequate food” (p. 2).

The interdependence of the human and natural worlds was also clearly evident in literature composed by authors from a variety of non-social work disciplines. Kempf (2008) for example, wrote extensively about the co-modification of the environment. He argued that poverty was inextricably linked to environmental degradation and revealed how social suffering, as a result of the strain exerted on natural systems for the benefit of the rich, most acutely affected the poor. He cited for example, “cancer villages” in China that are surrounded by chemical factories whose pollution cause critical illness amongst residents (p.42). Kempf (2008) also told of how Brazilian peasants' lands are confiscated in order to fuel unrestrained real estate speculation (p. 41). Indeed for Kempf (2008), suffering of this sort is a result of Capitalism and its consumerist foundation. Moreover, he contended that consumerism is a product of “provocative distinction” whereby “extra production is generated by the desire to display one's wealth” with the effect of fuelling “conspicuous consumption and generalized waste” (p. 61). The following conclusive remark by Kempf (2008) is poignant and must be realised by the social work profession in its quest for sustainable social justice: “there is a synergy between the global environmental crisis and the social crisis: they respond to one another, influence one another, and deteriorate in tandem” (p. 43).

In 2010, the United Nations (UN) released a series of climate change campaign resources that commented on the humanitarian effects of climate change. One resource titled, *Climate Change: Coping with the Humanitarian Impact* claimed that the number of people affected by

extreme weather has been unprecedented (UNOCHA, 2010). Like Kempf (2008), the UN emphasised that the poor; those subject to abject poverty including, “HIV/AIDS, environmental degradation, inadequate housing and insecurity” (2010, p. 1) were most vulnerable to extreme climatic changes. In its Humanitarian Response Plan for Yemen 2010, the UN stated that Yemen’s 2009 abnormal rainfall and 2008 drought resulted in it being “unable to replenish its rapidly depleting water supply” (UNCAP 2009, p.1) with far reaching consequences on increased population migration and the livelihoods of farmers with rainfall dependent crops. Indeed, environmental crises have significant social ramifications on the world’s poorest people.

Like Kempf (2008), the UNOCHA (2010) and UNCAP (2009), Gosine and Teelucksingh (2008) evidenced the link between social and environmental justice. Specifically, they drew a link between environmental justice and racism and highlighted the disproportionate effects of environmental racism on vulnerable members of the global community. They asserted that environmental racism is experienced acutely by those on the fringes of society and close to unappealing land uses. For example, they argued that environmental racism was central to the experience of the Africville community in Nova Scotia in the 1960s. Africville was known for its relatively large population of black, native, low-income and new immigrant residents. In the 1960s, the community was to face significant social and economic marginalization after the local government permitted the building of a sewage treatment plant within its boundary (Allen, 2003). Consequent destruction and the forced relocation of the community reiterates, that vulnerable people most severely suffer the social effects of environmental degradation. Indeed, according to Allen (2003), Africville community members continue to suffer “the toxic legacy of environmental racism” (p. 20).

The link between social and environmental justice is absolute and obliges the social work profession to incorporate environmental justice into mainstream practice as “concern for any oppression necessitates concern for all oppression” (Besthorn 2003, p. 14). Coates (2004) agreed suggesting “the patterns of exploitation that impoverish the Earth and create the environmental crisis can be seen as the same patterns, values and beliefs which contribute to the exploitation of people” (p. 3). This sentiment is further captured by Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) who insisted that if social workers were to honour the fundamental rights of individuals and communities, they must systematically develop and apply theoretical and practical responses to the contemporary environmental crisis.

Practical applications: Summary of findings

Much of the contemporary literature associated with ecosocial work advocated for a broadening of the notion of the person-in-environment (Besthorn, 2002; Coates et al., 2006; Marlow & van Rooyen, 2001; McKinnon, 2001; Ungar 2002; Zapf, 2005a; Zapf, 2005b) or a new ethic in social work (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2000; Coates, 2003a; Coates, 2003b; Coates, 2004; Hillman, 2002; Keefe, 2003; Muldoon, 2006). Additionally, Ungar (2002) referred to a New Ecology in Practice; a basis for a non-hierarchical social order. However, a framework for practice was seldom offered to manifest such a holistic ecological vision.

Along with Ungar (2002), Besthorn (2003), Coates et al. (2006) and Coates (2003a, 2003b, & 2004) called for a paradigm shift or a new ecological consciousness that acknowledged human-with-environment as opposed to human-in-environment. Much of the literature reviewed explored conceptual antidotes for the profession to transition from the confines of modernity towards a more inclusive ecological framework for practice. Focus centred on incorporating spirituality into social work's value base (Besthorn, 2002; Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003b; Coates, 2004; Coates et al., 2006; Zapf, 2005a) specifically by drawing on Indigenous knowledge (Coates, 2004; Coates et al., 2006; Ungar, 2002; Zapf, 2005a; Zapf, 2005b), deep ecology (Coates, 2003a; Coates, 2003b; Coates, 2004; Keefe, 2003; Ungar, 2002; Zapf, 2005b) and ecofeminism (Besthorn, 2002; Besthorn, 2003; Coates et al., 2006). Besthorn (2003) referred to deep ecology and ecofeminism as radical ecologies that demand social work no longer "ignore that it has, sometimes unwittingly, cooperated in creating a disenchanted world and desacralized humanity characterized by a kind of synthetic, spiritually muted, alienated feeling and lifestyle" (p. 13). Indeed, the literature overwhelmingly advocated for an understanding of the interrelatedness of person and nature which, according to Besthorn (2002), will "enhance social work's ability to understand and, therefore, act upon a broader range of human issues" (p. 16).

Other attempts were made to establish a new vision for practice via a set of guiding principles (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003b; Ungar, 2002). Ungar (2002) argued that guiding principles, such as "Intrinsic Value", "Divestment to Community" and "Enlightened Development" (p. 488), have the potential to offer social work a means of utilising ecological theory in a non-oppressive manner as they act as an over arching conceptual scaffold on which to build a variety of intervention strategies. Similarly, Muldoon (2006) alluded to the importance of holistic practice. She contended that it is imperative that the environmental movement involves workers in the social realm so as to prevent "the reproduction of a dominant ideology that does not address social stratification" (2006, p. 8) and also to prevent the development of additional fixed and inflexible modes of practice. Muldoon (2006) called for a "broadening of practice, rather than a new technology" (p. 8). Hillman (2002) mimicked Muldoon's sentiment and alerted the reader to the possibility of a new theoretical foundation becoming an "institutionalised part of the policy process" (p. 350). Coates et al. (2006) agreed, suggesting that "professionalising trends define boundaries" (p. 3) to create explicit technologies of practice. Diversity is paramount to an ecocentric mentality as a variety of guiding principles defend against a systematic and individualized framework for practice (Ungar, 2002).

A significant proportion of the literature highlighted the increasing significance of community work in the practice of ecosocial work (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003a; Coates, 2003b; Coates, 2004; Hillman, 2002; Marlow & van Rooyen, 2001; McKinnon, 2001; Muldoon, 2006; Ungar, 2002). Hillman (2002) argued that environmental degradation is experienced at the local level and, therefore, emphasized, along with Coates (2003b), McKinnon (2001), and Muldoon (2006) the importance of practicing ecosocial work at the local or community level while also maintaining a global perspective. The need for social work to form coalitions with other professions was also stressed (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003b; Hillman, 2002; Muldoon, 2006) as was the need for social work to return to its activist roots (Besthorn, 2002; Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003a; Coates, 2004; McKinnon, 2001; Muldoon, 2006). Muldoon (2006),

Besthorn (2003), and Coates (2003b) also emphasized the need for ecosocial work to enter mainstream social work education.

Disappointingly, while the literature did centre on the transactional relationship between people and their environment, it did not explore the practical application of this relationship. Instead, the literature overwhelmingly advocated that social work lead in creating a new vision for practice by critiquing the existing relationship between the natural environment and oppression. Ecocentric approaches to practice that were offered by Muldoon (2006), Besthorn (2002), and McKinnon (2001) appeared somewhat abstract, devoid of detail and detached from everyday interaction with service users. Perhaps this is due to the fact that their recommendations appeared to rely mostly on theorizing. Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) and Coates (2003a, 2003b, 2004), however, were notable exceptions.

Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) reported on an exploratory study that examined if and how social workers incorporated green issues into their practice. Mailed questionnaires were sent out to two populations of social workers in New Mexico, USA, and KwaZulu, South Africa respectively. Their research proved highly valuable in understanding the role of ecosocial work in practice as findings were contrasted between two geographic locations; that is a “developed” and “developing” country. Respondents from New Mexico reported to engage in ecosocial work primarily with individuals whereas respondents from South Africa were more involved in community based services and organizations. It is interesting to note that although the respondents in New Mexico focused their ecocentric practice on the individual, the majority of literature coming out of “developed” world examined in this review emphasized the need for community based ecocentric practices. Overall, the majority of respondents declared the following categories as the primary ways in which environmental issues were incorporated into practice: philosophical interpretations, cleaning up environment or recycling, and education for increased awareness of green issues.

Significantly, the study acknowledged the barriers preventing respondents from engaging in green practice, including heavy workloads, lack of education, lack of time, and lack of resources (Marlow and van Rooyen 2001, p. 247). Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) offered recommendations for future ecocentric practice and unlike any other piece of literature examined in this review, they wrote from an evidence-based perspective endowing their discussion with significant and systematic credibility.

Coates (2000, 2003a, 2003b, 2004) also offered a variety of practical applications for ecosocial work. He emphasized the need for social workers to involve themselves in three prominent activities to bring about a global consciousness: “to act as a prophet assisting people to view all life as sacred and to recognize the importance of personal choice and action”, “to develop social structures that support the wellbeing of all life” and “to challenge those structures that block individual and community wellbeing” (Coates 2000, p. 6). Coates' recommendations are at times broad in scope, for example, “assisting people to realize that uniqueness and fulfilment are sought through deeper participation in the whole and not through separation” (Coates 2003a, p. 13) and “supporting community initiatives they promote inclusion and

celebrate diversity” (Coates 2004, p. 6). However, his explorations into practical ecosocial work are thorough and appeared to be unprecedented in contemporary social work literature.

The way ahead: Implications for social work practice and research

There are several limitations to this review. All material with the exception of Marlow and van Rooyen’s (2001) study was produced in the “developed” world potentially excluding marginalized perspectives and practices from the global South. Overwhelmingly, the literature reviewed presented a rhetorical commitment to ecosocial work, one that offered more of a prophecy than a framework for practice. Justifiably, current literature has the potential to instil motivational fervour within the reader however its limited understanding of how to practically apply such fervour leaves the reader ill equipped to act on such a convincing vision. Indeed, Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) ended their article by highlighting the need for social workers to make a “planned and concerted effort to systematically address both theoretical and practical responses” (p. 253) to the environmental crisis.

Ultimately, the literature alluded that change to the profession's skill base is not highly necessary. Indeed several pieces of literature maintained social workers possess many of the skills required for ecocentric practice (Coates, 2003b; McKinnon, 2001; Muldoon, 2006). The change summoned related more to the motivation for practice. The literature insisted that motivation must increasingly result from recognition that the wellbeing of one organism is linked to the wellbeing of all other organisms. There is need for a fundamental mentality shift in the social work profession if it is to embrace an ecocentric outlook.

Clearly, knowledge is lacking in the area of practical ecosocial work. Research is desperately needed to explore the practical realities of ecosocial work. Without this, it is unlikely that ecocentric practice will reach the attention of policy makers and enter mainstream social work as an evidence-based practice. Future studies could take the form of action research, a “useful approach for studying something that does not yet exist but that is just emerging and is therefore an issue of development” (Reason & Bradbury, as cited by Narhi, 2004, p. 23). Regardless of the research type, it is essential that guidelines for environmentally related interventions permeate mainstream practice for not only does social work have much to contribute to the fight for environmental justice, it also has much to gain (Muldoon, 2006).

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