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Environmental Social Work: A Concept Analysis

Sylvia Ramsay and Jennifer Boddy*

Griffith University, Southport, QLD 4222, Australia

*Correspondence to Jennifer Boddy, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus, Parklands Drive, Southport, QLD 4222, Australia. E-mail: j.boddy@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

Environmental social work and related terms have been used widely to describe an approach to social work practice that is founded on ecological justice principles. However, practice applications of environmental social work are scant and there are various terms and a range of interpretations of the practice that exist. Using a concept analysis framework, we identify the attributes and characteristics of environmental social work, develop an operational definition and use a case study to illustrate the practice of environmental social work. In this way, we seek to improve clarity, consistency and understanding of environmental social work practice among educators, practitioners and researchers. In essence, environmental social work assists humanity to create and sustain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem and does this by adapting existing social work methods to promote societal change.

Keywords: Social work, natural environment, ecological, green, sustainable, practice framework, community

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Introduction

The number of publications that highlight the importance of integrating the natural environment into social work practice has grown exponentially. Historically, many non-Western traditions have integrated the natural environment into their world view (Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Gray and Coates, 2013; Mosher, 2010). Several authors (Kemp, 2011;

Peeters, 2012*b*; Rambaree, 2013; Shaw, 2011; Smith, 2013; Zapf, 2010) assert that pioneering social work approaches of the late 1800s and early 1900s were also inherently inclusive of the environment, while others cite social memes developing from Carson's *Silent Spring* (Hawkins, 2010) and ecological systems theory as placing the natural environment into social work practice (Ferreira, 2010; Ungar, 2002; Zapf, 2010). Further, international guidelines oblige social workers to take into account the natural environment (International Federation of Social Workers, 2012) while professional principles of social justice and equality compel social workers to address the crisis facing our natural environment (Dominelli, 2013*a*; Gray and Coates, 2012; Kemp, 2011; Schmitz *et al.*, 2012).

Despite this strong case for environmental social work, many authors have noted the relative absence of social work in recent public environmental discourse (Besthorn, 2012; Ferreira, 2010; Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012*b*; Pulla, 2013; Weber, 2012; Zapf, 2010). A lack of environmental content in social work education is illustrated by a level of environmental literacy no better than the average population (Miller and Hayward, 2014; Shaw, 2011). This may be due to the submersion of social work in an individualistic, materialistic, anthropocentric, clinical, modernist paradigm (Besthorn, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Mosher, 2010; Zapf, 2010). Yet publications have tripled twice in the last fifteen years, suggesting a professional change. Additionally, students want more knowledge about how to engage in environmental issues (Miller and Hayward, 2014; see also McKinnon, 2013; Shaw, 2011).

The mandate to be environmentally pro-active may be clear, yet application of environmental social work in practice is limited (Miller and Hayward, 2014; Norton, 2012; Shaw, 2011). Confusion or lack of clarity about what 'environmental social work' entails and how it is defined is likely to contribute to this gap. Different interpretations of environmental social work and a variety of related terms used to describe the concept (see Table 1) can be confusing and impede the identification of interventions to advance environmental social work. In the absence of clarity, translation of concepts into practice is unlikely. Consequently, this paper utilises a concept analysis to define 'environmental social work' and identify its main elements. A common understanding can benefit those entering the profession and support current practitioners to integrate environmental social work into practice.

Concept analysis

A concept analysis (Krathwohl, 1993) improves understanding of abstract constructs like 'environmental social work' by identifying its key attributes so that research and practice endeavours 'find the concept

Table 1 Publications categorised by keyword in title

Terminology	Publications
Green social work	Broad (2008); Dominelli (2012a, 2013a, 2014); Lane (1997); Lucas-Darby (2011); Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001); Shaw (2011); Weber (2012)
Eco-feminist social work	Besthorn and McMillen (2002); Stephens et al. (2010)
Spiritual and eco-spiritual social work	Besthorn (2002*a*); Besthorn et al. (2010); Canda (2002); Coates *et al.* (2006); Derezotes (2009); Dylan and Coates (2012); Faver (2009); Ferreira (2010); Graham *et al.* (2006); Gray (2008); Gray and Coates (2013); Hanrahan (2011); Zapf (2005, 2008)
Ecological social work	Berger and Kelly (1993); Besthorn (2001, 2012*a*, 2013*a*); Besthorn and Canda (2002); Coates and Tester (2004); Greif (2003); Jones (2010, 2013); Maton (2000); McKinnon and Bay (2013); Rotabi (2007); Shaw (2008); Ungar (2002*a*, 2003*a*, 2003*b*)
Environmental social work	Alston (2013); Bartlett (2003); Besthorn (2002*b*); Besthorn and Canda (2002); Besthorn and Meyer (2010); Borrell et al. (2010); Coates (2003, 2005, 2008); Coates and Gray (2012); Colley et al. (2012); Coulter and Noss (1988); Dylan (2013); Faver (2013); Gray and Coates (2012); Gray et al. (2013*b*); Green and McDermott (2010); Hawkins (2010); Hayward et al. (2013); Hillman (2002); Hoff and Polack (1993); Hoff and Rogge (1996); Jarvis (2013); Jeffery (2014); Jones (2006); Kemp (2011); Lysack (2010, 2012, 2013); McKinnon (2008, 2013); Mertig and Dunlap (2001); Miller et al. (2012); Muldoon (2006); Närhi (2002); Norton (2012); Park (1996); Pulla (2013); Rogge (1993); Rogge and Darkwa (1996); Schmitz et al. (2013); Schmitz et al. (2012); Schmitz et al. (2010); Shepard (2013); Soine (1987); Taylor (2013); Van Rooyen (1999); Washington (1995); Woods (1998); Zapf (2010)
Sustainable social work	Besthorn (2012*b*); Blake (2009); Carrilio (2007); Mathbor (2007); Mosher (2010); Hall (1996); Rambaree (2013); Ryan (2013); Smith (2013)
Other; including natural, speciesism, climate change	Berger (1995); Besthorn and McMillen (2002); Besthorn *et al.* (2003); Coates and Leahy (2006); Dominelli (2011, 2012b, 2013*b*); Stehlik (2013); Tester (2013); Walker (2001); Wolf (2000); Gray et al. (2013*a*); Hare (2004); Heinsch (2012); Lichtblau (2010)

clearly communicable and increasingly measurable' (Olenick *et al.*, 2010, p. 75).The purpose of this analysis was to (i) determine attributes and characteristics of environmental social work; (ii) develop an operational definition of environmental social work practice, and (iii) provide a case example illustrating the practice of environmental social work.

Our analysis adopted an approach described by Rodgers (1989) recognising relativism and using an inductive literature analysis to identify: (i) the concept of interest, (ii) alternative terms and relevant uses of the concept, (iii) the literature—or data sources—for data collection, (iv) the attributes of the concept, (v) the antecedents and consequences of the concept, (vi) related concepts and (vii) a model case. We modified the approach, borrowing from Walker and Avant's (2005) traditional method, utilising the literature to construct a composite model

case, because published examples of environmental social work practice did not demonstrate all the concept attributes. We acknowledge that utilising antecedents and consequences implies the concept has linear causes and effects, when in fact environmental social work practices are circular and interrelated. However, it is hoped that the concept analysis presented in this paper aids the understanding of students, practitioners and researchers.

Data sources

A number of databases were searched, including Proquest, CINAHL Plus, Web of Science, SAGE Journals Online, Wiley Online Library, and Taylor and Francis journals. A title search using the phrase 'social work' was combined with the following terms using Boolean logic: green, environ*, sustainab*, eco-spiritual, eco-feminis*, ecolog*. A total of 771 articles were located. After duplicates were deleted (n =391), 380 articles remained. Articles published before 2010 were then excluded to ensure that the definition developed in this article reflected current ideas. This resulted in 117 articles for consideration.

Articles were excluded if it was clear from the title that they were unrelated to the profession of social work, did not address the natural environment, were written in a language other than English, or were newspaper articles or book reviews. While other sources may provide important insight into practice, the peer review process used in scholarly publications ensures that articles are insightful and recognised as being useful to contemporary practice. Abstracts of journal articles were reviewed and those that mentioned both social work and the natural environment were included in the review. This resulted in twenty-three articles.

Further sources were located by reviewing major social work texts in this field by Dominelli (2012*a*) and Gray, Coates and Hetherington (2013*b*), and searching for articles by authors who were referenced frequently including Besthorn, Coates, Dominelli and Gray. This resulted in twenty-five articles. Using the same search terms in Google Scholar, nineteen articles were located, resulting in sixty-seven articles for full review.

Data analysis

Text from the articles was extracted if it examined social work practice in the natural environment. Extracts were collated and recorded using EndNote. Findings were summarised and salient antecedents, attributes and consequences uncovered through thematic clustering, that sought

both inclusiveness and utility. It is assumed that these themes reflect ideas common to environmental social work practice. The term 'environmental social work' was chosen in this analysis because it appears to be the most widely used term in the literature (see Table 1). Alternative terms were not excluded as analysis showed a large overlap between terms, suggesting a common discourse.

Antecedents, attributes and consequences

Social workers are compelled to care for the environment by higher authorities including professional associations (McKinnon, 2013; Pulla, 2013; Shaw, 2011), the United Nations (Hawkins, 2010; Smith, 2013) and, for some, God (Mosher, 2010). Deontological imperatives also support shifting practice and theory to incorporate ecological and environmental justice (Besthorn *et al.*, 2010; Dominelli, 2012*a*; Dylan and Coates, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2013). Antecedents that compel social workers to adopt and act environmentally include evidence about the effects of climate change on marginalised people and awareness about the interrelationships between humans and the biosphere (Besthorn, 2012, 2013*b*; Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Besthorn *et al.*, 2010; Dominelli, 2014; Dylan, 2012; Dylan and Coates, 2012; Ferreira, 2010; Gray *et al.*, 2013*b*; Gray and Coates, 2012; Hanrahan, 2011; Hawkins, 2010; Hetherington and Boddy, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2010; Zapf, 2010).

Four key attributes defined environmental social work. The first of these—creative application of social work skills to environmental concepts—is an overarching characteristic of environmental social work practice. The remaining three attributes include: (i) openness to different values and ways of being or doing, (ii) a change orientation and (iii) working across boundaries and in multiple spaces. Table 2 highlights the number of articles that discuss each attribute.

Creatively apply existing skills to environmental concepts

All authors stated existing social work skills are useful in addressing effects and mitigating environmental degradation. Skills include empowerment, team building, community development, management, culturally competent and anti-oppressive practice, multi-level assessments, holistic interventions and relational practices (Alston, 2013; Besthorn, 2013*a*; Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Borrell *et al.*, 2010; Dominelli, 2012*a*; Hawkins, 2010; Rambaree, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Weber, 2012). Social workers must be political, showing leadership in development of public values and policy, and advocating for rights and justice (Besthorn, 2013*b*; Dylan, 2012, 2013; Dylan and Coates, 2012;

Table 2 Number of articles that state attributes

Themes	No. of articles	%
Creatively apply existing skills to environmental concepts	67	100
Openness to different values and ways of being or doing		
Shift practice, theory and values to incorporate the natural environment	67	99
Learn from spirituality and indigenous cultures	28	41
Incorporate the natural environment in social work education	17	25
Appreciate the instrumental and innate value of non-human life	22	32
Adopt a renewed change orientation		
Change society	60	88
Critique hegemony	58	85
Work across boundaries and in multiples spaces		
Work in multidisciplinary teams	58	85
Work with communities	45	66
Work with individuals	38	56

Kemp, 2011; Lysack, 2012; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012*b*; Ross, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2010). Using an ethical framework, being congruent, reflective and reflexive in practice are central (Dylan, 2013; Jones, 2010; Lucas-Darby, 2011). Thus, environmental social work requires creative application of existing social work skills to environmental issues.

Openness to different values and ways of being or doing

Shift practice, theory and values to incorporate the natural environment

Almost all articles (99 per cent) agreed that the theoretical focus of social work must change to include the natural environment. There must be awareness amongst practitioners of humans' interrelationship within nature and humanity's ability to disrupt natural systems (Besthorn, 2012; Dominelli, 2013*b*; Faver, 2013; Gray *et al.*, 2013*b*; Pulla, 2013; Zapf, 2010). Recognition of nature's innate value and a move to ecocentrism must occur (Gray *et al.*, 2013*a*; Miller and Hayward, 2014; Ryan, 2013; Stephens *et al.*, 2010). Pursuit of equality and justice necessitates environmental equality, meaning all animals including people have equal access to safe and clean environments, respect and dignity (Alston, 2013; Dylan, 2013; Dylan and Coates, 2012; Hanrahan, 2011; Ross, 2013). Responding to natural disasters has a place (Alston, 2013; Dominelli, 2012*b*; Stehlik, 2013), but social work must be pro-active in preventing environmental deterioration (Colley *et al.*, 2012; Hawkins, 2010; Heinsch, 2012; Peeters, 2012*a*).

Learn from spirituality and indigenous cultures

Spirituality tended to be defined as being in one's correct place within humanity and living well in that place (Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Jones, 2013; Lichtblau, 2010). Many articles (41 per cent) reported on learning from Aboriginal, Latino, Native American Indian and African traditions (Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Dominelli, 2013*b*; Faver, 2013; Gray *et al.*, 2013*b*; Mosher, 2010; Polack *et al.*, 2010; Zapf, 2010). Additionally, Buddhism, Taoism, Romanticism, Collectivism and Jungian psychology were reported as helpful for developing environmental social work frameworks (Besthorn, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2013*b*; Mosher, 2010). Many authors (including Dominelli, 2012*a*; Dylan, 2012; Dylan and Coates, 2012; Heinsch, 2012; Lysack, 2012; McKinnon and Bay, 2013; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Norton, 2012; Norton *et al.*, 2013) suggested social workers could be inspired by and learn from spiritual traditions and cultural diversity.

Incorporate the natural environment in social work education

To promote change, it is essential that environmental values and practices are integrated throughout the curriculum (Dominelli, 2011; Dylan and Coates, 2012; Green and McDermott, 2010; Hayward *et al.*, 2013; Jones, 2013; Kemp, 2011; Schmitz *et al.*, 2010)—an attribute discussed in 25 per cent of articles. 'Simplistic conceptualizations of the environment' (Jeffery, 2014, p. 292) should be avoided by applying a critical lens and education should occur outside of formal settings, becoming part of professional development (Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Faver, 2013; Jones, 2010; McKinnon and Bay, 2013; Shepard, 2013; Stehlik, 2013).

Appreciate the instrumental and innate value of non-human life

All articles explicitly stated or implicitly assumed the biosphere has innate value and plays a vital role in supporting human life. Thus, social workers should move away from anthropocentricity. Additionally, 32 per cent of articles highlighted how practice is enhanced through a connection with the natural environment. For example, the natural environment can improve well-being, and give purpose, confidence, fulfilment and insight (Besthorn, 2013*a*; Besthorn *et al.*, 2010; Norton *et al.*, 2013; Hanrahan, 2011; Heinsch, 2012; Lichtblau, 2010; Lysack, 2012; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Norton, 2012; Norton *et al.*, 2013; Ryan, 2013; Taylor, 2013). Knowledge of instrumental benefits provides social workers with justification for environmental interventions when working within anthropogenic power structures.

Adopt a renewed change orientation

Critique hegemony

The neo-liberal paradigm can be so pervasive that its values are integrated, without realisation, into individual and social actions (Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Jones, 2010). According to 85 per cent of articles, environmental social workers need to understand and critique this paradigm (Coates, 2005; Ferreira, 2010; Gray *et al.*, 2013*a*; Green and McDermott, 2010; Hanrahan, 2011; Hawkins, 2010; Hayward *et al.*, 2013; Jones, 2010; Lysack, 2010; Miller and Hayward, 2014; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Peeters, 2012*a*; Stephens *et al.*, 2010; Zapf, 2010). Radical and anti-oppressive practices can reveal anthropocentrism, andropocentrism, contemporalism, speciesism, somatophobia, green-washing and environmental racism (Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Clark, 2010; Dylan, 2012; Hanrahan, 2011; Ryan, 2013; Stephens *et al.*, 2010; Taylor, 2013; Tester, 2013). A new ecocentric narrative to counter modern and postmodern narratives must be developed (see Dylan and Coates, 2012; Jeffery, 2014; Schmitz *et al.*, 2013).

Change society

According to 88 per cent of articles reviewed, societal change, from the micro to the macro level, must be initiated (Colley *et al.*, 2012; McKinnon, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2013) to ensure environmentally destructive practices are viewed as immoral. Critiquing laws, using mass media, facilitating workshops and public forums to raise consciousness, researching alternatives, informing public debate, advising decision makers, lobbying and contributing to policy formulation advance this goal (Besthorn, 2013*b*; Coates, 2005; Hawkins, 2010; Lysack, 2012; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Schmitz *et al.*, 2012; Taylor, 2013; Zapf, 2010). Participation in social action, protests and civil disobedience (Dominelli, 2011; Dylan, 2012; Ferreira, 2010; Gray and Coates, 2012; Miller and Hayward, 2014; Shepard, 2013) and facilitating others to join such actions (Jarvis, 2013; Lichtblau, 2010; Norton *et al.*, 2013) are required.

Social workers should call on government to enact and enforce environmental safe guards, argue for limits on human population growth, promote incentives for environmental activity (Dominelli, 2012*a*; Hayward *et al.*, 2013; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Shaw, 2011) and advocate for a system that shifts from continual industrial growth to a sustainable economy (Besthorn, 2012; Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012*a*; Kemp, 2011; Lysack, 2012; Peeters, 2012*b*; Stephens *et al.*, 2010). Promoting an alternative paradigm in which practices are amended to include nature

(Jarvis, 2013; Stehlik, 2013) and non-linear problem solving is required (Dominelli, 2012*a*; Dylan, 2012; Mosher, 2010). Dylan (2012), Faver (2013) and Ross (2013) advise monitoring and evaluating the activities of big business, critiquing 'green-washing', exposing exploitative multinationals and holding them responsible for their environmental damage (see also Gray and Coates, 2012; Tester, 2013). Social workers should explicitly value environmental and ecological justice (Besthorn, 2012, 2013*a*; Dominelli, 2012a, 2013a, 2014; Hawkins, 2010; Jarvis, 2013) and engage in a change process to create a sustainable society.

Work across boundaries and in multiple spaces

Work in multidisciplinary teams

The development and maintenance of inter-disciplinary collaborations with cultural leaders, activists, community leaders, other professionals (Borrell *et al.*, 2010; Norton, 2012; Shepard, 2013) and spiritual advisers (Lysack, 2012; Mosher, 2010) were suggested in 85 per cent of articles. Collaboration provides new insight, knowledge and skills (Dominelli, 2012*a*; Miller and Hayward, 2014; Schmitz *et al.*, 2013) needed to solve current, complex problems (Faver, 2013; Green and McDermott, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Lysack, 2010).

Work with communities

Working to develop and support communities, sharing local knowledge and resources can develop strength, resilience and overcome environmental problems (Jones, 2010; Lichtblau, 2010; Rambaree, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2010)—a view shared in 66 per cent of the articles. Interventions need to educate, mobilise and support community activism, establish alliances and help build capacity for community initiatives such as food co-operatives, combined purchase power for fuel or new technologies, co-housing, permaculture and local production (Dylan, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2013; Norton, 2012; Norton *et al.*, 2013; Peeters, 2012*a*; Polack *et al.*, 2010; Rambaree, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2012; Shepard, 2013; Weber, 2012). This will provide an antidote to the materialism and individualism of capitalism (Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Ferreira, 2010; Peeters, 2012*b*; Polack *et al.*, 2010).

Work with individuals

Over half the articles (56 per cent) examined the practice of working with individuals, helping individuals gain skills that enable them to reduce their environmental footprint and care for themselves and the environment (Besthorn, 2013*a*; Dominelli, 2011, 2012a, 2013a, 2013b, 2014; Dylan, 2013; Faver, 2013; Heinsch, 2012; Rambaree, 2013). Individuals need assistance to accept and reclaim their interconnection and dependence on the natural world (Dylan and Coates, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2013*a*; Hanrahan, 2011; Jones, 2010; McKinnon and Bay, 2013; Schmitz *et al.*, 2010; Shaw, 2011) and language to describe environmental concepts (Gray *et al.*, 2013*b*; Lysack, 2010).

Consequences

Ultimately, environmental social workers are seeking to create a society in which ecological and social justice are valued and humans live in harmony with ecosystems. Adopting the attributes of environmental social work will create this vision, and also increase professional integrity (Besthorn *et al.*, 2010; Dylan, 2012; Hayward *et al.*, 2013; Lysack, 2012). It will help fulfil objectives of social justice, anti-oppression and equality, ensuring human well-being and survival (Gray and Coates, 2013; Gray *et al.*, 2013*a*; Jarvis, 2013; Jones, 2013; Lysack, 2013).

Environmental social work promotes human well-being, compassion and an understanding of systemic discrimination, and values the innate qualities of other animals, recognising their moral right to exist (Ryan, 2013). According to Norton *et al.* (2013), interaction with the natural world gives zest to life—a sense of purpose, confidence, empowerment and fulfilment. Self-insight, authenticity, sensitivity and knowledge are increased, assisting personal and professional development (Miller *et al.*, 2012; Norton, 2012). Interaction with nature improves physical, cognitive, emotional and spiritual well-being (Lichtblau, 2010; Lysack, 2012). Nature gives aesthetic pleasure and a space for socialisation, social cohesion and the development of community (Besthorn, 2013*a*; Besthorn *et al.*, 2010; Norton *et al.*, 2013). Connecting with other animals also assists individuals to overcome distress and provides awareness of ecosystem ill-health (Hanrahan, 2011; Heinsch, 2012; Taylor, 2013).

Working across boundaries and in multiples spaces will help people individually and collectively reduce their environmental footprint, while caring for themselves (see e.g. Alston, 2013; Besthorn, 2013*a*; Coates and Besthorn, 2010; Dominelli, 2012*a*; Gray and Coates, 2013) and enables people to act in compassionate ways, minimising the suffering of all life forms.

Concept definition and model case

Environmental social work assists humanity to create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem. Core social work values, skills and knowledge can be adapted to promote social change, helping practitioners to respond to and mitigate environmental degradation.

The case below fits a community approach to environmental social work practice. We expect that social workers will use professional discretion to apply the attributes to other situations. For example, while many workers are focused on immediate concerns related to housing, health, child protection, poverty and so on, it is important to be mindful that the magnitude of these issues is compounded by environmental degradation. The health and well-being of clients can be improved by incorporating the natural environment into practice. The process can begin by being open to different values and ways of being or doing—an attribute that concentrates on growing self-awareness. Practitioners can focus on learning from other cultures, appreciating the value of other life forms, being aware of the ways the natural environment supports life and making choices congruent with environmental social work in their personal lives. By critiquing the hegemony and modifying interventions, front line workers can help change society to become inclusive and sustainable.

The case provided elucidates practice that is cognisant of the natural environment and highlights the attributes of environmental social work:

> Maree, a rural social worker, thought her clients were uninterested in the natural environment. She realised, after reflecting on clients' stories, that they displayed aspects of biophilia—that is, an instinctive connection between humans and other living systems. Many residents reminisced about life before the local river was diverted by a dam. Stories were often censored by a prevailing attitude that loss of nature was inevitable. This prompted Maree to investigate the effect of development on the environment and the health and well-being of communities.
>
> Using her interpersonal skills, Maree created a space for people to explore their experiences, so as to validate and normalise concern for nature. Subsequently, a small group formed to document and explore the re-establishment of local biodiversity. Drawing from skills in group facilitation, Maree worked with the group to promote cohesion, shared purpose, trust and problem-solving abilities. She also assisted the group to engage with political representatives, educate others, and interact with traditional and online media. Members of the group became community change champions, writing to the local paper, establishing and monitoring social media accounts, and speaking at the school—actions that stimulated other locals to acknowledge the importance of the environment. Over time, Maree noticed a cultural shift in the town, as it became common for residents to express appreciation for nature. Maree also

facilitated discussion between farmers and the indigenous community about the land, modelling respect and valuing difference, while highlighting a commonality of purpose around stewardship of nature. Like many, Maree found this growing collaboration broadened her understanding of nature.

When the town's green space was threatened, members of the community challenged the proposal. Maree contacted and compiled responses from diverse professions, and assisted individuals to draft submissions about the proposed development impacts. As officials failed to respond to these and other measures, including petitions and rallies, community outrage increased. Local citizens, including Maree, decided to occupy the green space to halt development and raise a media profile. Maree also supported the campaigns of like-minded political candidates at the council election, and their success led to changes in local planning laws to protect public green space.

Maree joined a national coalition of environmental groups campaigning to strengthen laws ensuring environmental and social impacts are considered before federal or state governments approve developments. Maree also began mentoring other social workers to incorporate the natural environment into their practice and helped develop education materials for students, including podcasts and online modules, about environmental social work. Maree's activism and leadership thus influenced practice, policy and political change.

This model case illustrated a way to apply the attributes of environmental social work. As environmental social work emphasises responsiveness to local need, the social worker began with openness to new ideas, adapting her practice as community needs were identified. Within a safe space, community members came to see the value of the natural environment and became more motivated to learn and care about their bioregion. The social worker supported community members to become more ecocentric. The social worker used her existing skills to build alliances and strengthen community action, while she continued to learn about her own cultural influences. She pursued opportunities to shape decisions at individual, community, governmental and international levels and the social work profession. She utilised change tools within the system, such as education, submissions and electioneering, while also promoting change through civil disobedience. Over time, the community began to shift away from the dominant neo-liberal paradigm, creating opportunities for future change towards a more sustainable way of life.

Discussion

At present, environmental social work differs from other social work because, as shown in Figure 1, it places the ecosystem at the centre of

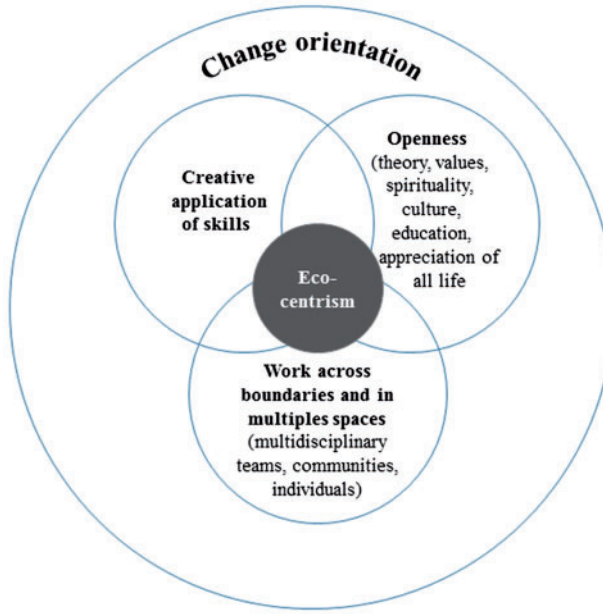

Figure 1 Environmental social work practice

practice rather than a person—an idea referred to as ecocentrism. A strong argument made throughout the literature is that sustaining ecosystems and ecocentrism must become mainstream social work practice. As highlighted in Figure 1, social workers must adapt their existing social work skills to new areas of practice while remaining intellectually open and working in multiple spaces. The work will also include creating extensive social change.

Despite common themes in the literature, highlighted in Figure 1, there is some divergence. In particular, some authors focus more on the innate value of non-human life while others focus on its instrumental value. Such a difference should be expected, because both cognitive and social change tend to be evolutionary processes (Gray and Coates, 2013; Green and McDermott, 2010; Miller, Hayward and Shaw, 2012). The literature moves from anthropocentric, instrumental views of nature, to the awareness and practice of reciprocal ecocentrism.

There are also a number of gaps in the literature. For example, there are few examples about how environmental social work practice has been implemented other than in social work education. It will be important for practitioners to develop their practice, test methods developed by other professions, and begin establishing a robust research, theory and practice base in this area. This will involve both the development of

content knowledge, such as knowledge of ecology, and process knowledge, such as the use of social media and information technology.

Creating change will be challenged by difficulties in prioritising environmental issues, the demoralisation of social workers in many parts of the world and the dominance of neo-liberalism. Finding a balance between the obligation to create widespread social and environmental change and social work's commitment to protecting minority groups, while also respecting the right of individual self-determination, will be difficult. Such dilemmas are not new, but they require dedicated detailed critical analysis that is mindful of social work values and the interconnected nature of human health and well-being with the natural environment. While more work needs to be undertaken to clarify how workers can negotiate such issues, social workers must avoid accepting the status quo and instead think creatively about addressing environmental challenges. For example, social workers could undertake aspirational thought experiments, such as striving to emulate the unconditional love displayed by some animals (Hanrahan, 2011), implementing non-human animal rights (Ryan, 2013; Taylor, 2013), or engaging in activism against capitalism (Dylan and Coates, 2012).

It is likely that those advocating for the type of systemic change envisaged by environmental social work may find themselves in vulnerable, isolated situations. Professional bodies should offer support to members in such situations. Social workers may also draw on nature itself (Heinsch, 2012; Lichtblau, 2010), allies from other disciplines (Lysack, 2012) and experiences of past pioneers, such as women's suffrage, civil rights, peace activists and progressive labour unions, to help maintain morale for promoting a sustainable, ecocentric world.

Another challenge for social workers will entail maintaining momentum and grassroots support for interventions when trying to operate within bureaucratic systems. Bureaucracy can be particularly slow when implementing innovations (Weber, 2012). It will be important for social workers to maintain connections within and outside the discipline to support innovation, while sustaining social change. Social workers may do this, in part, by drawing from social media and online communities.

The profession's tradition of borrowing from other disciplines should be maintained (Brekke, 2012; Jarvis, 2013; Jeffery, 2014; Miller and Hayward, 2014) while expanding the fields referenced to include knowledge and practices informed by environmental sciences such as biology, climatology, geology and ecology. Being informed by a variety of perspectives is a strength when addressing complex issues such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, food security and access to fresh water that environmental social work will face. A clear definition of environmental social work will allow social workers to recognise the aspects of other disciplines that would further the goals of environmental social work,

such as counselling (Greenleaf *et al.*, 2014), teaching (Lysack, 2009), politics (Litfin, 2013) and business (Vickers and Lyon, 2012).

Limitations

Though extensive, the literature review did not include all publications, such as those in languages other than English, so important ideas may have been omitted. This review also favours academic knowledge—an approach justified by the modern positivist paradigm which has been critiqued for its exclusion and oppression of many groups including women, children, non-human animals and the natural world (Gray and Coates, 2012). The concept analysis was biased to the views of authors with multiple publications and, as the authors were unable to give feedback on the summarised themes, we made subjective assessments on the most important themes that the authors of the original publications may not agree with.

Conclusion

This paper identified and explained the key attributes of environmental social work, and then used these attributes to illustrate what the practice of environmental social work is through a case study. Environmental social work is focused on helping humanity create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem which includes humans. A clear definition of environmental social work will solidify the foundations of this approach and encourage practical implementation of the attributes and values. It can help social workers to broaden and strengthen practices by knowing which ideas to incorporate from other academic disciplines and other forms of knowledge.

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