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Changing gears: Shifting to an environmental perspective in social work education

Mel Gray and John Coates¹

Abstract

This paper seeks to add to the growing literature on environmental social work education which suggests the need for a fundamental rethinking of the humanistic values and theories informing social work to embrace concerns relating to environmental degradation and climate change. For the most part, social work's interest in the environment to date relates to human needs. Of most concern here is the over-representation of people in poverty and subsistence among those impacted by deforestation and climate injustice. However, even here the emphasis is on the human experience of environmental and climate change when this is an outcome of human actions and structural inequalities. The paper begins with an overview of the theoretical terrain of environmental thought before examining issues in relation to perspective transformation and the implications for undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) curriculum development.

Keywords: Values, environmental perspective, social work education, perspective transformation

The International Declaration of Human Rights enshrines key values that undergird social work analyses of social policies and their need to mitigate the worst effects of global economic growth and development. In supporting free trade and globalization, national governments and

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international development organizations have colluded to promote – directly and indirectly – an extractive economy and the destruction of major ecosystems, not to mention the exacerbation of gross inequalities. The literature discusses that environmental impacts are directly related to poverty and detrimentally affect those very populations that social workers seek to help, especially the poor. For example, Pandey (1998) discussed the relationship between women, the environment, and sustainability in Nepal, where rural women and children were overwhelmingly threatened by environmental degradation and deforestation. Case examples such as this underscore the importance of an environmental perspective for social workers seeking to improve the plight of individuals, families, and communities, who not only bear the brunt of pervasive inequality and social injustice, but are also doubly disadvantaged by adverse environmental events.

The environmental movement has not only exposed how human action and exploitation contribute to environmental change and structural inequality, but also provided viable alternative values of conservation, degrowth, diversity, sustainability and restoration modelled on the vision of a thriving planet with flourishing inhabitants (Berry, 1988, 1999; Capra, 1982; Hannis, 2015; Korten, 2009; Spretnak, 1997). These values offer social work a framework for advancement toward equality and inclusion that point to transformative social work education and practice (Dominelli, 2013; Coates, 2003, 2005; Ife, 2013). This paper concerns itself with a vision of social work as ‘a political and moral enterprise’ (Clark & Asquith, 1985, p. 2) concerned with justice, change and social transformation, and how environmental values might shape a new curriculum (Coates & Gray, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012). In this way, it seeks to add to the growing literature on environmental social work education (Besthorn, 2003; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Jones, 2008, 2010, 2013, 2014; Hoff, 1992; Kahn & Scher, 2002; Hayward et al., 2013; Rogge, 1993; Schmitz et al., 2013).

An opening note on terminology

There is a confusing array of terminology in the environmental literature, which, overall, is not, by definition, holistic. As Ife (2013) correctly points out, there are two distinct strands of environmental thought. The strand he describes as ‘environmental’ is based on linear, cause-effect thinking and, by definition, is not holistic. He distinguishes this ‘environmental perspective’, which he says, seeks change within the existing modern social and economic order, from a more radical ‘Green perspective’ pushing for a fundamentally transformed society. Together Ife’s (2013) ‘environmental’ and ‘Green’ approaches comprise what he refers to as an ‘ecological perspective’ that is very different from its early iterations in social work, where the terms ‘ecological’ and ‘ecosystems’ were used as an extension of the ‘person-in-environment perspective’ (e.g. Germain, 1981, 1991; Gitterman & Germain, 1980; Meyer, 1983). These early writers focused on the person in the *social* environment drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) ecology of human development and their so-called ‘ecological’ approaches had little concern for what environmentalists see as the *physical* environment. Hence these social work scholars, among others, appropriated and applied the ecological model without truly understanding the full spectrum of interdependence, diversity, and community that goes with a ‘holistic ecological perspective’ (see Besthorn, 1997; Coates, 2003; Ife, 2013; Zapf, 2009).

Given the confusion surrounding the use of the term ‘ecological’ in social work, and the fact that the term ‘environmental perspective’ does not necessarily refer to holism and interdependence, what might a more accurate term be? Possibly ‘deep ecological’ or ‘dark green’, which, as Besthorn (2012) describes, arose in opposition to the linear environmental approach, is more accurate, but this, too, like ‘Green’, has related implications. The term ‘Green’ has come to be associated with Left-leaning political parties on the back of a social-environmental movement that includes diverse social and political groupings, organizations,

and actors from the grassroots to high-level international players. Green has also been used as a marketing tag to suggest that things that are anything but ‘environmentally friendly’, such as companies manufacturing doors and paper, and draws on the emotive notion that ‘green’ means clean, good, and wholesome, such as green living and thinking. One rather complex option is an ‘enriched environmental, holistic ecological’ perspective but, given ecology’s association with the ‘science of ecology’ – as in ‘is it ecologically sound?’ – in this paper, we have opted for a more inclusive ‘holistic environmental’ perspective, which is, no doubt, also debateable.

The theoretical terrain of environmental thought

Despite the confusion surrounding terminology already described, the alternative theoretical framework – assumptions, values and beliefs – that informs a holistic environmental perspective builds on a long line of scholars from several disciplines (e.g. Berry, 1988, 1999; Capra, 1982; Coates, 2003; Hart, 2004; Spretnak, 1997; Trainer, 1985, 2010), who discuss its core features of holism, diversity, sustainability, equilibrium and interdependence. These are quite different from modern society’s priorities that include economic growth, determinism, anthropocentrism, consumption and individualism. Drawing attention to, and fully articulating the nature of, this holistic environmental perspective have been significant contributions of environmental thought for social work (see, for example, Besthorn, 2013; Dylan, 2013). A holistic environmental perspective points to the limitations of linear thinking in modern science, and society’s unquestioned faith that science and technology can provide all the answers to the environmental problems that we are currently facing. Further, it points to the unsustainability of the existing socio-economic order and the consequences it has wrought for the environment. Most importantly, it reflects an alternative foundation of values and assumptions, which requires a deep exploration of social work’s humanistic values and theoretical foundations.

The challenge with any form of transformational practice and education is to critique yet build on what has gone before. Up until now, much critical literature has served to polarise thought by rejecting prior analyses, creating dichotomies and generating unnecessary conflict, rather than creating a more progressive and integrative analysis and practice. The biggest and most important contribution of the environmental discourse for social work has been the critical exploration of social work's role in modern society and the humanistic assumptions, beliefs and values that support this role. Such a critique opens the door to the profession seeing the limitations and boundaries of modernity (dualism, uncaring domination, ruthless exploitation, and reductionism) that have constrained social work thinking and action to the primary activities of helping *people* 'to fit in and adjust to the demands and expectations of modern life' (Coates, 2003, p. 38) rather than to change them.

Holistic environmental discourse supports the exploration of an alternative and inclusive set of values, beliefs and assumptions that include interdependence, community and diversity (see Berry, 1998; Besthorn, 2013; Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008; Spretnak, 1997). These values are seen as important to living in right relationship to Earth so as to promote the integrity and stability of the natural world on which human development and survival depends (Brown & Garver, 2009). Human dependence on the physical environment sits behind social work's goal to help create sustainable environmental conditions for the flourishing of the human – and natural – world (Hannis, 2015). Within a holistic environmental perspective, individual well-being is understood as embedded in community, that is, in 'the well-being of my neighbour, of all of the planet's people and of the Earth itself' (Coates, 2003, p. 156). Further, it requires a critical perspective on the impact of human actions on environmental change and structural inequality. This broader perspective distances social work from the constraints of economic and materialistic determinism and places it in the struggle for social transformation within a new foundation of values beyond concerns for human interests (see Coates, 2003; Gray &

Coates, 2012; Jones, 2013). Thus perspective transformation becomes a central component of social work education as it lies at the heart of a transition from a modernist, human-centred to an enriched holistic environmental perspective.

Perspective transformation

Jack Mezirow's (1991, 1997, 2012) work on perspective transformation outlines several steps that educators can take to help create conditions that support a shift in perspective. These steps include exposure to, and critique of, the dominant perspective and the presentation of an alternative one. Any curriculum change toward a holistic environmental approach would benefit by recognising and accommodating this process (Coates, 1994). Perspective transformation is, most frequently, slow and gradual, because people do not easily let go of deeply entrenched values and assumptions. A new perspective throws us out of our comfort zone and requires changes in lifestyle and behaviour that many are reluctant to make. However, tides of change in collective thinking can support a shift in assumptions, values and actions. We think environmental awareness is one such tide that will eventually make it impossible for social work to avoid making fundamental changes in education and practice.

To be effective, the introduction of environmental issues into the social work curriculum would require support within a school of social work though, in the USA, the new EPAS (CSWE, 2015) makes this obligatory. Coates' experience with the introduction of structural social work and spirituality into the social work curriculum shows that such transformation takes place over several years. A change of this dimension needs an advocate, usually a professor passionate about the topic, who introduces it as something that needs to be considered, and proceeds to prepare a course, write about and even develop a network to discuss and debate the issue at conferences and in academic publications. Several writers have written about the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration in this endeavour (e.g. Norton, 2012; Schmitz et al., 2012). Over time, usually with much discussion and debate, and

increasing attention in scholarly literature, its relevance becomes clearer and like-minded scholars start to integrate material into their teaching and research. A critical point is reached when foundational or theory courses start to include content to support the new concept such that, eventually, it becomes a foundation itself and begins to influence how the curriculum is structured and taught. In social work, areas as diverse as evidence-based practice and spirituality have become embedded in this way, with varying emphases across national contexts. Jones (2013) refers to the way in which new areas may be added as the bolt-on, embedding and transformative options, and offers an example of transformative education in ecological literacy by bringing community spaces into the social work classroom (Jones, 2014).

However, certain areas, like decolonized or Indigenous social work, and now environmental social work, have been a tough sell as they differ substantially from the foundational assumptions of much of existing social work scholarship, especially where it is heavily dominated by Anglo-American scholars rooted in individualistic therapeutic approaches. The value of therapeutic approaches notwithstanding, there are many contexts where a broader relational perspective that situates individual problems in the larger social context of *inter alia* poverty, inequality, patriarchy, classism, racism, heterosexism, privilege, and ableism is preferable (Folgheraiter, 2004). Progressive scholars and activists within social work have pushed the profession to examine the personal-political dimensions and structural realities of people's lives and, in so doing, have expanded the boundaries of social work theory and practice (Gray & Webb, 2013a, 2013b). Their success in so doing has possibly led to efforts to better integrate micro and macro practice and to begin to take on a more collective perspective in the new EPAS (CSWE, 2015) revision in U.S. social work.

Environmental literature has progressed to include a critique of the foundational beliefs informing Western society, and Western social work (Gray, Coates et al., 2013). As Mezirow (1991, 1997) showed, perspective transformation begins when core values are challenged,

when long-held beliefs and assumptions no longer seem to fit. We have seen such transformations on a broad scale in the way in which people think about the position of women in society such that it is unconscionable to entertain the idea that women do not have a right to vote. There are numerous examples, such as the way we think about people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer, even though these groups are still subjected to discrimination in many quarters (Thompson, 2012). There is a tide of change at work that supports the fundamental change of values a holistic environmental perspective entails. For example, the spirituality, Indigenous and decolonization discourses question the dominance of Western values. Today people think differently about colonialism and the role of missionaries in spreading Christianity and destroying local traditions, cultures, values, languages and beliefs. Decolonization is affecting social work in diverse ways and is best seen in relation to cultural relevance and appropriateness (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, et al., 2013). This is especially true in non-Western contexts and may not resonate with the experience of social workers in North America and Europe, yet.

This changing tide has created greater awareness of climate change and environmental destruction, of gross inequality and the concentration of wealth in the hands of the few, and of the destructive force of corporate greed and excess (Klein, 2014; Ife, 2013) and this is contributing to gradual perspective transformation. It is leading to a critical questioning of the core values of Western society and is seen to be influencing social work through emerging areas of scholarship. Just as feminist thought highlighted patriarchy and male dominance and radical social work the impact of race and class so holistic environmental thought focuses on the excesses of modernity and its extractive economy, its impact on climate change, and the limitations of a humanistic focus.

Shifting gears in our thinking: Transforming the curriculum

So what then does this change in perspective mean for social work? First, it suggests the need for a fundamental rethinking of the humanistic values and theories informing social work. Ecocentric environmental values relating to *inter alia* conservation, degrowth, diversity, sustainability, spirituality and restoration can inspire a reformulation of social work's existing anthropocentric values (Gray & Coates, 2012). This requires rethinking social justice in social work; for example, Besthorn (2013) advocates a radical equalitarian ecological approach to justice, which moves beyond the priority of human interests to appreciate the interdependence of all people and the larger body of life, including non-sentient beings and natural systems.

Secondly, it suggests a broad encompassing theoretical framework that incorporates an understanding of environmental issues and their impact, including species extinctions, pollution, habitat destruction, industrial 'accidents' and natural disasters (Dominelli, 2013; Gray et al., 2013). Locating this in the history of the environmental movement, with examples of the role other professions have played, enhances the relevance of these issues for social work. Thus it opens a terrain for interdisciplinary and interprofessional work most-often called for in environmental practice relating *inter alia* to post-disaster interventions, food security, peace studies, crime prevention and environmental restoration (see Coates & Besthorn, 2010; Dominelli, 2012, 2013; Norton, 2012; Schmitz et al., 2013). Also relating these issues to broader discourses of neoconservatism and globalization shows students how political, economic and social processes produce environmental impacts. It is not just the environment *per se* that we are concerned with, but how our ideas are shaped, so we see structural issues as distinct from, and of lesser concern than, depression or violence, for example. Social work can become part of the growing movement to create a social and political context where social transformation is possible. Hence it suggests a framework for analysing multiple oppressions arising from inter-related social, economic and environmental problems (Gray et al., 2013). Most importantly, it draws attention to the fact that poor people are most affected by

environmental destruction and climate change (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013). Here, course material could focus on climate injustice highlighting how climate change impacts on small nations with low (or almost zero) carbon footprints, or food security enabling community gardens, community-supported agriculture or local food purchasing coops to provide people on low incomes with fresh and healthy food (rather than primarily eating food that travels thousands of kilometres). There is a space here for social workers to work as facilitators of active citizenship and advocacy on a local and global scale.

Thirdly, environmental practice highlights a macro role for social workers in, for example, conducting community assessments where environmental impacts are a consideration; using local and 'traditional knowledge' of the environment as an asset on which to design programs, especially in disaster and climate change work; and encouraging foundations and community funding agencies to incorporate environmental concerns as a significant factor in funding applications. Jones (2014) provides an example of a classroom workshop in which students reflect on the nature and extent of social and environmental issues in authentic community-based scenarios; employ systems thinking to examine the connections between these; and design a strategy that simultaneously addresses both these issues grounded in the principles and practices of an ecologically-oriented community development approach, which values process, participation, and local wisdom.

Finally, the environment offers excellent material for policy courses, especially as an example of the role of political and economic institutions in supporting policies and practices that negatively impact upon the environment or get in the way of environmental regulations and safeguards. It also offers an excellent opportunity to bring in an international perspective showing how international development aid organizations have colluded to promote an extractive economy and the destruction of major ecosystems, and in the process, to exacerbate gross inequality.

When one marries the underlying theoretical approaches and issues, discussed above, with the diverse contexts in which social work is practised, an almost full curriculum begins to emerge if taught along with generalist skills and practice approaches at the individual, group, organizational, community and policy levels. The new Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards of the U.S. Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2015) has introduced a new competency that supports the introduction of curriculum content on environmental justice. Social work's leading international organizations have also provided a framework for environmental education and practice in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (IASSW/IFSW, 2012).

The focus on specific environmental issues needs to grab students' attention. Relating climate change to its impact on people and animals, rather than spending too much time on complex science, especially with video footage, is likely to be most engaging. Students will more easily grasp a holistic environmental perspective if it is presented as an extension of ecological and systems theory that shares the concepts of interdependence, unity, holism and connectedness. An environmental perspective also resonates with evidence-based practice and highlights the contradictions in scientific evidence (Gambrill, 2014). A discussion of research for and against climate change, for example, raises awareness of the uses and misuses of research to support various perspectives. If spirituality or Indigenous social work were already taught in the curriculum, students would more easily grasp how the values underlying an environmental perspective lead to a questioning of long-held beliefs and assumptions (Coates, Gray, & Hetherington, 2006; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have presented some ideas for the development of a curriculum and the theoretical ideas undergirding such a change. In so doing, we have attempted to add to existing literature and the work of writers interested in advancing an environmental perspective in social

work theory, practice, and education. The economic excesses and levels of inequality in contemporary society are unsustainable and, as this realization grows in time, interest in the issues that we have raised will grow and perspective transformation will take place making it impossible for social work to avoid incorporating environmental content, such as that we have suggested, in the curriculum. The next step in promoting environmental justice in social work has already begun with the literature growing in this area and environmental themes now incorporated in international and local social work conferences. As more and more academics and students, and practitioners, engage in discussions surrounding environmental issues and the role of social work, a climate will be created for new courses in the curriculum and so social work will begin to embrace a holistic environmental perspective and the new practices that emerge therefrom.

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