An ecologically centred approach in social work: Towards transformative change

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Certificate of authorship

I hereby acknowledge that this submission is my own work. To the best of my knowledge and belief, except where due acknowledgment is made in the thesis, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material which, to a substantial extent, has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma at Charles Sturt University or any other educational institution. Any contribution made to the research by my colleagues with whom I have worked at Charles Sturt University or elsewhere during my candidature is fully acknowledged.

I agree that this thesis be accessible for the purpose of study and research in accordance with the normal conditions established by the Executive Director, Library Services or nominee, for the care, loan and reproduction of this thesis.

Signed:
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Professional editorial assistance

Professional assistance was obtained from Dr Bronte Somerset and Richard Parker from Thesis Proofreading and Formatting. According to the Australian Standard for Editing Practice (ASEP), editorial assistance was limited to formatting, grammar and style, and did not alter or improve the substantive content or conceptual organisation of the thesis.
Ethical approval

This thesis is presented as a portfolio of publications, which involved ethics approval for four individual research projects. Reports on three of the four projects, included below, represent larger projects which were conceived prior to the period of candidature. However, the majority of data collection, analysis and publication of project subsets presented in this thesis occurred during the period of candidature. Ethics approval for each of these projects was obtained from Charles Sturt University according to the following details:

Ethics approval for the research project under the original title, ‘Exploring the wisdom of our elders’, was obtained from the Charles Sturt University, Arts Faculty Human Ethics Committee, protocol number 100/2015/71

Ethics approval for the research project under the original title, ‘Driving holistic change: The consilience of environmental, academic/educational, international and community sustainability goals’, was obtained from the Charles Sturt University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, protocol number 103/2012/05

Ethics approval for the research project under the original title, ‘Student understanding of key themes in social work: Impacts of short term international study experiences’, was obtained from the Charles Sturt University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, protocol number 103/2011/12

Ethics approval for the research project under the original title, ‘Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective’, was obtained from the Charles Sturt University, School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee, protocol number 103/2011/02
Research publications

This thesis is presented as a portfolio of nine peer reviewed publications comprising seven journal articles and two book chapters:


Statements from co-authors

As a portfolio of publications, some of the publications that make up this thesis were co-authored. The contribution made by the candidate has been confirmed in writing by the co-authors of each collaborative publication and is detailed in Appendix 1.
Abstract

In the context of an accelerating global environmental crisis that threatens the ecology upon which life on Earth depends, there is an urgent imperative to reposition social work as an ecologically responsible profession. This thesis aims to explore how an ecologically centred approach can transform social work, particularly in relation to education, professional practice and the developing conceptualisation of ecosocial work. Using a critical research paradigm, qualitative research methodologies are used to examine ecosocial work education strategies and potential practice frameworks. Key findings indicate the need for transformative change within social work involving a fundamental re-orientation away from human-centred perceptions, towards a worldview that reflects humankind’s interdependence with the natural world. A range of elements central to ecosocial work, as well as concerns that impede the development of ecosocial work, are identified.

This thesis culminates by proposing a model for transformative ecosocial change, which articulates a consistent philosophical base across the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice. Implications for social work centre upon the need to challenge fixed assumptions, and to develop approaches in education and practice that challenge the prevailing, dominant, modernist discourse.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

This thesis aims to advance the development of an ecologically centred approach in social work, particularly in relation to education, practice and the conceptualisation of ecosocial work. This chapter introduces the research topic, provides a rationale, and presents the aims and objectives of the research. In addition, the influence of my personal background and position is discussed and considered in the context of ethical research practice. Finally, the structure of the thesis is explained.

Rationale for research

There is worldwide consensus that an environmental crisis is taking place, involving a range of factors that threaten life on Earth, including: increasing climate variability; rising sea levels; increasing pollution; loss of habitat; extinction of species; an increasing world population; and global warming (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2014; United Nations Environment Program [UNEP], 2014). Present and future impacts of this environmental crisis on humans, particularly climate variability, involve large scale social, environmental and economic costs, including food and water insecurity, displacement of homes and communities, increased mortality rates and poverty (IPCC, 2014). Plants and other species are also struggling to adapt to a changing climate, with those requiring unique conditions, such as specialised food sources or specific temperatures, expected to be most affected (IPCC, 2014). Further projections for identifying the level of risk posed to nonhuman species from climate change have estimated that one in six species face possible extinction, with species in Australia, New Zealand and South America most at risk (Urban, 2015).

The weight of evidence suggests these recent changes to the world’s ecosystems are largely caused by human activities since the industrial revolution, and propelled by increasing economic and population growth (IPCC, 2014). A landmark report by the World Health Organisation (WHO, 2005) found that nearly half of the world’s ecosystems had changed since the industrial revolution, and that humans had unsustainably used 60 per cent of the world’s ecosystems. As a result, nations around the world, including the United Kingdom (Committee on Climate Change [CCC], 2016),
Canada (Warren & Lemmen, 2014), United States (Mellilo, Richmond & Yohe, 2014) and Australia (Australian Government, 2015) are grappling with issues of mitigation and adaptation in the face of major environmental changes. Global efforts, including the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), aim to develop international treaties for fostering a global approach to address climate change and a range of associated social impacts. However, critics suggest that national and international groups, such as the United Nations and World Bank operate within the dominant economic model responsible for climate change, emphasising continued economic growth at the expense of broader issues relating to global poverty, social injustice, and depletion of the natural environment (Blewitt, 2015; Castro, 2004).

Reports also suggest the natural environment has a fundamental role in determining human health and well-being. Recent human-induced changes to the world’s ecosystems are having an inequitable impact on the world’s poorest citizens (Parry, Schutte, Patrick & Armstrong, 2016; WHO, 2005). For example, women and girls worldwide are more likely to suffer disproportionately from food and water insecurity caused by disturbances in agricultural production (WHO, 2014). An increase in temperatures and subsequent increases in infectious diseases are likely to disproportionately affect children from lower socio-economic backgrounds, particularly in poorer countries (UNEP & WHO, 2010). In Australia, Hansen, Bi, Saniotis and Nitschke (2013) document the association between ethnicity and vulnerability to extreme heat, and Parkinson and Zara (2013) explore women’s experience of violence after the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria. Social work, a profession committed to enhancing human well-being and social justice (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014) ought to be concerned with this unfolding social and environmental crisis (Alston, 2015; Dominelli, 2015; Gray & Coates, 2015; Matthies & Närhi, 2017), but to date responses from the profession have been limited. This research aims to advance the development of an ecologically centred approach in social work, particularly in relation to education, practice and the conceptualisation of ecosocial work.
Research aim and objectives

The overarching aim of this research is to explore how an ecologically centred approach can be conceptualised and developed in social work. The objectives of this research are to:

- Explore strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work education;
- Explore strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work practice; and
- Distinguish key elements and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work.

Research concepts

Conducting an inquiry to address these research objectives requires clarity of terminology in relation to the philosophical assumptions underpinning the research. The philosophical framework adopted for this research reflects my own beliefs, and is congruent across ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects. Although the definitions assigned to ontology, epistemology and methodology vary among authors, an awareness of these diverse philosophical groupings and assigned meanings enabled me to develop my own classification system, informed by the work of these scholars. For example, some authors (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 2004) consider ontology and epistemology as equally significant concepts, and therefore discuss underpinning assumptions accordingly, whereas Crotty (1998) prefers to merge these concepts by discussing underpinning assumptions together. By understanding how my own philosophical classification system is similar or dissimilar to these authors, I seek to explain my position and outline the meanings of relevant philosophical terms adopted in this thesis.

The meaning of research concepts in this thesis is adapted from authors such as Guba and Lincoln (2004) and Staller (2012), who depict ontology, epistemology and methodology as a set of philosophical concepts, consisting of the most abstract (ontology) at the top and the most concrete (methods) at the bottom. Although this depiction could be critiqued for imposing a hierarchical worldview, Staller (2012)
argues that this approach is useful for understanding the links between each level of research. Further, Guba and Lincoln (2004) argue that these layers are interconnected in such a way that the position at one level will inform the next. For instance, if the nature of existence at the most abstract level (ontology) is assumed to be natural realism, then the way to discover this truth is undoubtedly through ‘objective’ endeavours (epistemology). The relationship also can occur in reverse, in that all research methods used for data collection can be traced back to ontological, epistemological and methodological positions (Scotland, 2012). Drawing on Guba and Lincoln’s (2004) and Staller’s (2012) opinions, the meanings of relevant philosophical research components adopted in this thesis are described below. My rationale for adopting the chosen concept at each level is argued in Chapter 3.

**Ontology:** addresses questions about the nature of being, existence and reality. For example, a significant question is ‘what is the nature of reality?’ The ontology underpinning this thesis is historical realism.

**Epistemology:** addresses questions about the nature of knowledge and how knowledge is created. Relevant questions include ‘what counts as knowledge?’ ‘What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched?’ Subjectivism and societal ideology are the key epistemologies informing this thesis.

**Methodology:** is the plan or approach for undertaking the research and lies behind the particular methods being used. The question asked here is ‘How can the inquirer find out what needs to be known?’ In this thesis the critical paradigm, using the theoretical lens of critical social work, employed dialogic and dialectical methods.

**Situating myself in the research**

Inevitably, my own ontology or ‘being’, which is made up of personal morals, beliefs and attitudes, influenced my choice of and approach to the research topic, my behaviour towards participants in this research and my approach to data collection and analysis. As a child growing up in rural New South Wales (NSW) Australia, I had the opportunity to nurture a connection with the natural environment. Now as an adult and mother, I have developed concern for the future of Earth and for my children, who will be living in a different environment to the one with which I was familiar as a child.
These personal dimensions of how I understand and relate to the natural environment, as well as my views about climate change, were integral to this research.

Having established a strong critical stance as foundational to my being or identity as a social worker, I was committed to developing a meaningful research experience that was congruent with this stance. My role as a lecturer in social work was conducive to maintaining this critical stance and to exploring various aspects of an ecologically centred approach, including theory, education and practice. I have shared my interest in the developing conceptualisation of ecosocial work with students wherever possible and endeavoured to integrate the natural environment into class discussions. Despite my efforts, I struggled to operationalise broad-based notions of ecosocial work premised on social work values and theory into day-to-day practice strategies applicable across a range of contexts. My original research plan therefore aimed to fill a gap in knowledge about ecosocial work practice strategies through action research with practitioners.

During the early stages of exploring relevant literature, I discovered that although some significant progress has been made in advancing an ecologically centred approach, there were ambiguities with regard to professional issues and major gaps in the development of basic concepts. I consequently decided to redirect my research focus to the formation stage of ecosocial work through a range of qualitative methodologies and data gathering techniques. Researching multiple aspects of ecosocial work, including education, practice and theory, enabled me to develop a holistic overview of the key elements that inform the social work profession.

As part of situating myself in the research, it was essential that I acknowledged the values associated with my personal and professional dimensions of ‘self’ which may have inadvertently influence interactions and behaviours throughout the research process. As a member of various sub-groups, I acknowledged that particular assumptions, roles, and behaviours were associated with my affiliation with these groups. Additionally, history and past experiences also play a role in developing inherent associations and particular values. The following factors in my life were acknowledged and were reflected on throughout the research process to promote an ethical approach to research practice.
• As a social work academic and researcher, I was aware of the power associated with the positions I hold, and the negative influences this could have on my relationship with participants and my approach to analysis, unless a critical reflexive praxis approach was adopted. A critical reflexive praxis approach enabled me to: reflect on my experience as a researcher; challenge my assumptions; analyse and apply theory; and be open to changing my approach (Connolly & Harms, 2013). Understanding my use of ‘self’ was fundamental to developing my critical reflexive praxis approach to research skills.

• As a non-Aboriginal woman I recognised that my lens used for this research was culturally biased towards a Euro-Western frame of reference, which, unless challenged through a critical reflexive approach, could perpetuate hierarchies and power imbalances. While I endeavoured to challenge this dominant frame of reference, I accepted that I was on a journey of understanding the invisibility of whiteness and the associated privileges that come with being a white, Euro-Western social worker (Walter, Taylor & Habibis, 2013).

• I also acknowledge that Australia’s first peoples established knowledge of country in Australia. As custodians of the land, Aboriginal people took land care seriously and used sustainable living practices developed over many thousands of years. Aboriginal ways of knowing and being are valuable for developing social work and should be accepted as equal to other knowledges within social work. I understand the indigenisation of social work to be an ongoing process, which challenges my own understanding and the profession’s conventional knowledge base.

• As a member of a professional group, such as social work, I acknowledge that a ‘professional’ approach to working with people carries with it a form of elitism (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015), which in itself can contradict social work’s mission for equality and social justice. The use of associated professional language, such as ‘client’ and ‘service user’, implies hierarchy and has the capacity to perpetuate unequal power relationships. In an effort to redress this imbalance, I embraced a collaborative approach to research that recognised the importance of all stakeholders in the process of developing knowledge about ecosocial work. This process went some way toward sharing the power
of knowledge production and acknowledged the skills, experience and wisdom of non-social workers, social workers and researchers.

**Structure of the thesis**

Presented as a portfolio of publications, this thesis is organised into five chapters. Following this introductory Chapter 1, Chapter 2 begins by exploring the meaning of nature and associated ontological assumptions. Chapter 2 also provides a synthesis of current literature and emerging issues relevant to ecosocial work, including a historical overview, the professional policy context, relevant theoretical perspectives, and a critique of modernism.

In Chapter 3, a critical reflexive approach is applied to the research design, which offered me the opportunity to provide a balanced and comprehensive deliberation of the research process. To embody this critical reflexive approach that is fundamental to my social work ontology, I have adapted Fook and Gardner’s (2007) critical reflexive praxis model which involves a process of identifying (or uncovering) personal assumptions in order to make changes to the research process and to the broader context of society. This approach facilitates the ability of researchers to make accountable decisions, which lead to an improved approach to their research.

Chapter 4 is the heart of the thesis, consisting of nine peer-reviewed publications – that is, seven journal articles and two book chapters, published during my candidature as a PhD student. Each publication explores a specific aspect of ecosocial work, which relates to the overall research objectives. A summary of the publication details are in Table 1, including a number allocated to each publication, which will be used throughout this thesis to identify each publication. The publications are ordered according to how they address the research objectives. The full text of each publication is presented in Chapter 4, and the remaining chapters will integrate and synthesise the publications into a coherent whole, identifying key themes and issues relevant to the research objectives.
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Finally, Chapter 5 concludes the thesis by summarising the findings and drawing the main points together through a discussion that relates to the original research objectives.

As the publications evolved my use of terminology changed (for example, ecosocial and eco-social), both as a result of my learning and of publishers’ requirements. While every effort has been made to achieve consistency in the exegesis surrounding the publications, original expressions have been reproduced, as first published, in Chapter 4. The thesis is mainly presented in the third person, however I have chosen to write in the first person where appropriate to reflect my philosophical stance and to highlight my voice as an element of critical reflection.

I now turn to Chapter 2 which provides a literature review to define the natural environment, establish a theoretical framework and discuss the professional context relating to the research topic.
Chapter 2: Literature review: Social work and the natural environment

Introduction

This chapter focuses on how existing literature addresses social work’s relationship with the natural environment. While it may seem unusual to begin this chapter with a discussion about the meaning of nature, it is argued that the ontology of nature is foundational to developing an ethical and coherent ecosocial work approach. An overview of the process by which the natural environment became acknowledged in social work is then presented, including a historical perspective as well as discussion of recent professional moves to formally recognise the importance of the natural environment. Key theories and debates associated with the integration of the natural environment in social work are summarised, and a central paradox for the profession involving modernist roots is discussed. Finally, the developing conceptualisation of ecosocial work is briefly summarised.

Defining the natural environment

The philosophical position relating to beliefs about nature shape a person’s understanding of the natural environment. That is, the qualities and characteristics of the natural environment, as well as the place of nature on Earth, and the relationship between nature and humans, determine how nature is defined for that person (Cudworth, 2003). Similarly, different disciplines, such as science and sociology, are generally aligned with an articulated philosophical position about the qualities and characteristics of nature, which suggest a corresponding approach to professional activities. As a profession, social work has traditionally been associated with a modernist view of nature, which views humans as separate to and independent from nature (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). The philosophical assumptions associated with modernism, including individualism, advancing of modern society and pursuits for economic prosperity have influenced the profession’s approach to research, education and practice.

Social work also tends to emphasise the ‘doing’ or methodology of practice, which often removes ontology and epistemology from the forefront of practice (Aymer
& Okitikpi, 2000; Bell, 2012). However, it is argued that philosophical knowledge relating to nature, across all dimensions of ontology, epistemology and methodology, is foundational for developing an ethical and coherent approach to ecosocial work (Bell, 2013). Philosophical paradigms that shape how humans understand the characteristics of nature include positivist, constructivist, critical and relational paradigms. Although some proponents of these paradigms claim to fit neatly into defined boundaries, more often there is some complexity and overlap between these perspectives. This thesis challenges social work’s philosophical base by acknowledging that the natural world consists of multidimensional aspects, including physical, social, structural and relational dimensions.

A positivist view of nature involves a scientific understanding, which holds nature as an objective entity separate to human experience (Dunlap, 2010). The dominance of the positivist paradigm in society has meant that definitions of nature have predominantly consisted of references to the human and nonhuman species world. Most definitions refer to the physical world, consisting of plants, animals, and landscapes, and exclude anything that is human or made by humans (Soper, 1995). This approach, widely accepted by society, is based on realism and views the natural environment as an objective entity which is independent or separate from humans. The natural environment is seen as having absolute truths or rules that govern its existence, and which can be scientifically uncovered and described as facts (Crist, 2004). This view is criticised for neglecting the social and cultural dimensions of the natural environment, and for its effect of categorising nature as ‘other’ (Lahar, 1991). This separation between humans and nature is further critiqued for developing a culture of domination and exploitative tendencies towards the misuse and abuse of the natural environment (Plumwood, 2002).

Interestingly, the two dominant groups in public debates about the natural environment - environmentalists and environmental critics - share similar ontological views based on realism (Wapner, 2014). While environmental critics separate themselves from nature by privileging humans with the entitlement of shaping and managing nature, environmentalists separate themselves from nature by privileging nature as an independent and self-subsisting entity. Wapner (2014) argues that environmentalists place barricades between humans and nature for purposes of
protection and preservation from human intervention, which he argues is outdated since the human footprint on Earth is immense. Adherents to other forms of environmentalism express their concern for conservation through technocratic means (Benton, 1994). Similarly, environmental critics assert authority over nature by assuming they can control nature and overcome environmental issues with human logic and reason (Brown, 2006; Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2007). Environmental critics submit to ‘mastery’ of nature whereas environmentalists embody the ideal of ‘naturalism’. Although these perspectives represent opposite ends of the political continuum, often represented as economy (e.g. employment) versus ecology (e.g. wilderness), both neglect to acknowledge the link between humans and the natural world.

In contrast to positivism, the constructivist paradigm asserts an anti-essentialist perspective that deconstructs the objectivity of nature produced by positivists (Hannigan, 2006). A constructivist view of nature theoerises that individuals construct their own understanding of nature through the subjective interpretation of meaningful experiences (Dunlap, 2010). This position maintains that individuals interpret nature through historic lenses and are also influenced by the dominant culture of the time (Cudworth, 2003). Constructivist ideas concerned specifically with nature gained influence in the 1990s with various sociological writers, including Hannigan (1995), Eder (1996), Castree and Braun (1998) and Latour (2004), with the latter originally published in the French language in 1999. Constructivist approaches such as social constructionism, postconstructionism and postmodern constructivism have been developed to represent these variations. The more pure forms understand nature as a social construct developed through the subjective interpretation of meaningful experiences with little (if any) acknowledgement of any ‘real’ environment (see for example, Tester, 1991). Other constructivist positions acknowledge the existence of the natural environment and focus on related social aspects, such as the social construction of environmental problems (see for example, Hannigan, 1995), environment and society relationships (Eder, 1996) and dominant discourses (Hannigan, 1995; Tester, 1991). Under a constructivist paradigm, nature is not separate from humans, but is rather a subjective human experience. While one person may describe a thunderstorm as a dramatic and awesome experience, another may
see it as a frightening experience and a threat to one’s well-being. Likewise, a tree might be seen as a majestic natural creation to one person and a source of income for another person. These subjective realities make up a constructivist perspective.

Critics refute the social construction of nature on ontological and epistemological grounds, arguing that interpretations of nature may be relevant, but are separate to the fact that the physicality of nature exists (Demeritt, 2002). These critics argue that a purely constructivist view dismantles itself; for example, by reducing nature and associated environmental issues such as climate change into social problems and/or individual multiple realities (Crist, 2004; Cudworth, 2003). As Kidner (2000) asserts, social constructivism eradicates the need to consider our views of nature with reference to external factors since all knowledge is regarded as being developed by individual experiences. This means that structural elements relating to the natural environment, such as politics, capitalism, economic growth, and patriarchy are neglected. These diverse interpretations thereby underestimate both the physical and social dimensions of nature, including the seriousness of the environmental crisis currently facing the planet. Nevertheless, the realism-constructivism debate has more recently settled with the majority of constructivists arguing for the need to more closely consider relevant social, political and cultural processes, while maintaining a healthy scepticism towards absolute fact provided by scientists (Hannigan, 2006).

A third ontological position, the critical paradigm, acknowledges that the natural environment is ‘real’ and has social attributes, which are further shaped by structural power relations from within society (Cudworth, 2003). This position extends the constructivist paradigm by acknowledging that wider social constructs in society, such as culture, patriarchy and politics, influence and determine the meaning of the natural environment. Kidner (2000) advocates for a critical realist perspective, which he argues represents middle ground to the positivist-constructivist divide by acknowledging physical, social and cultural aspects of the natural environment, as well as political dimensions which open up practical pathways for addressing environmental problems. Dickens (1992) is also acknowledged for his critical realist position, which acknowledges a reciprocal relationship between humans and the natural environment and contends that industrial capitalism has caused human separation from nature and subsequent misuse of the natural environment. Although a critical perspective adds a
valuable dimension to understanding the meaning of nature, it could be critiqued for lacking emphasis on relational attributes and for not recognising the holistic characteristics of life on Earth.

Indigenous conceptualisations of nature generally adopt a collective framework, which understand humans as a part of the natural world (Baike, 2015; Green & Baldry, 2008). The term Indigenous refers here to Indigenous Australians (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples), as well as other Indigenous peoples worldwide. This holistic understanding of nature acknowledges relational attributes within and between humans and the natural world, and is the major differentiating characteristic from the above Euro-Western philosophies. Indigenous worldviews often regard Earth as sacred, and hold a spiritual connection between humans and the natural world (Voigt & Drury, 1998; Zapf, 2009). In defining the philosophy of Indigenous research, Chilisa (2013) describes the ontology of being as “the connections that human beings have with the living and the non-living...with the land, with the earth, with animals and with other beings” (pp. 20-21). This holistic and relational understanding of the natural world requires a paradigmatic shift for Euro-Western philosophies in order to understand humans as an interconnected part of nature.

This thesis adopts a view that the natural environment consists of multiple characteristics, including physical, social, structural and relational attributes. Physical elements of the natural environment encompass all living organisms (e.g. plants, insects) and non-living organisms (e.g. rocks, water) that occur naturally, and the relationships that exist within and between these, including humans. Social elements of the natural environment refer to the conscious interaction between humans and nature, which create meaningful and socially constructed experiences. The structural context of nature refers to the political and cultural systems that shape or influence nature; for example, politics, culture, patriarchy and capitalism. Finally, the relational attributes of nature refer to the interdependent relationships between humans and the natural world, which understands humans as a ‘part’ of the natural world, rather than as simply observers (positivist paradigm), interpreters (constructivist paradigm) or critics (critical paradigm).
Social work’s relationship with the natural environment

Although social work is well regarded for understanding social problems, there has been little recognition of the ‘natural’ environment within this context. Historical analyses of social work reveal that the profession has had an affiliation with the broader environmental context of people’s lives since its inception, including varied emphases on the physical, social and structural aspects of the environment (Närhi & Matthies, 2016a). Early pioneers of social work acknowledged the relationship between the physical environment and well-being in the early 1900s. Regarded as the founder of the reform movement in social work, Jane Addams believed that people’s problems were caused by environmental factors, including physical aspects relating to housing, sanitation and communities (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). Addams developed neighbourhood houses and used community development approaches, purposed towards social reform, to improve the lives of people living in poverty (Närhi & Matthies, 2016a). Mary Richmond (1922), regarded as an early founder of social casework, also acknowledged the importance of the environment in social work practice; for example, by stating that the physical environment “becomes part of the social environment” (p. 99). The ascendancy of psychodynamic theory during the 1930s to 1950s challenged this focus; yet despite this, some further developments in social work were made regarding the interactions between people and their physical environments during this time; for example, Reynolds (1933) and Hollis (1936).

In the late 1960s social work began to develop a distinct theoretical practice approach emphasising the sociocultural environment, which began to set the profession apart from other human service disciplines. General systems theories had a major impact on social work and provided a unified analytical approach for understanding problems and issues within the context of the social environment (see for example, Hearn 1969). Ecosystems theories advanced general systems theories by providing an applied practice approach (Healy, 2014). In particular, the life model of social work was developed, which emphasised a ‘person-in-environment’ perspective (Germain & Gitterman, 1976, 1980, 1996). This person-in-environment perspective established a reciprocal relationship between people and their social environment and has been widely influential in social work. However, this approach almost exclusively considered people in the context of their social environment; for example, in
association with local neighbourhoods, schools and social services, with little recognition of the natural environment (Närhi & Matthies, 2016a; McKinnon, 2008).

In the late 1970s emphasis on the structural elements of the environment in social work emerged. Along with other social movements of the time, such as feminism, this structural approach acknowledged the origins of social problems as being located in larger constructs of society (Närhi & Matthies, 2016b). This structural approach remains a major method of social work practice today. Rather than focusing on individual pathology, structural social work is concerned with the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of society, which exclude people from opportunities and meaningful participation in society (Mullaly, 2007). Today, structural social work is made up of a number of theoretical approaches, including: critical social work (Pease & Nipperess, 2016); radical social work (Fook, 1993); anti-oppressive social work (Dominelli, 1996); feminist social work (Dominelli & McLeod, 1989), and, anti-discriminatory social work (Thompson, 2016). Together these approaches highlight powerful and embedded structures in society, such as capitalism and patriarchy, which cause inequalities for people who are less powerful. Although little recognition of the natural environment was considered as part of structural social work during the 1970s, contemporary social work literature is often closely aligned with structural social work approaches; for example, to critique the political nature of climate change (Pease & Nipperess, 2016).

During the latter part of the 20th century there were some exceptions to the social, cultural, and structural perspectives of the environment that had dominated much of social work. For example, Weick (1981) called for the inclusion of the physical environment in social work, referring to “climate, air, noise, food, biological rhythms and atmospheric conditions” (p. 142). Further writings examined the impacts of toxic chemicals and other environmental hazards on health (Soine, 1987), and the role of social work in adapting to ecological change (Berger and Kelly, 1993). Substantial developments relating to the natural environment continued in the 1990s with Hoff and Polack (1993), Hoff and McNutt (1994), and Berger (1995), who highlighted the relationship between social work and the natural environment in the context of climate change. These later publications, along with increased public awareness of the
effects of climate change, began the ecological movement evidenced in social work today.

Since the turn of the century, the place of the natural environment in social work has gained momentum in response to increasing concerns for the inequitable impact of climate change on individuals, families and communities (see for example, Dominelli, 2012a; McKinnon, 2008; McKinnon & Bay, 2013). Social work authors have explored specific focus areas relating to the natural environment, including: environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Jarvis, 2013); global citizenship (Alston, 2015; Jones & Truell, 2012); disaster recovery (Alston, 2013; Ku & Ma, 2015); Indigenous ecospirituality (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006); sustainable development (Peeters, 2012); and, deep ecology (Besthorn, 2012; 2002). Other characteristics relating to the integration of the natural environment in social work have included: a holistic understanding of the natural world (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003); culturally located community-based approaches (Dominelli, 2015; Ku & Ma, 2015); an environmental/ecological and social justice value-base (Dominelli, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Peeters, 2012); and, emancipatory practice and social action (Närhi, 2004). These authors are calling for a concerted response to this unfolding social and environmental crisis as a matter of urgency. Although the terms ‘nature’ and the ‘natural environment’ are often used interchangeably, the term ‘natural environment’ will be used in this thesis to delineate it from the social, cultural and physical environments.

**Professional moves to recognise the natural environment**

Recent professional advances within social work recognising the natural environment are evidenced by the release of the report, *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action* (International Federation of Social Work [IFSW], International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] & the International Council of Social Welfare [ICSW] 2012). This document outlines five specific commitments for action from 2012 to 2016, including the promotion of “sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development” aimed at protecting the natural environment (p. 4). At the national level, moves have been made to incorporate the natural environment into codes of ethics, including the Australian Association of Social Work
(AASW, 2010). The AASW code mentions the environment 10 times with five of these explicitly relating to the *natural environment* (AASW, 2010). For example, the AASW code states “The social work profession also recognises that social work takes place in a context whereby social systems have a mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment” (AASW, 2010, p. 9. Section 1.3). Again, “Social workers will advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society” (AASW, 2010: 20, Section 5.1.3, clause m). These changes within social work reflect the movement within the profession to incorporate the natural environment into practice and place an ethical imperative on practitioners to promote sustainability as part of day-to-day practice.

In addition to this, social work has recognised the instrumental value of the natural environment by acknowledging that the natural environment is beneficial for therapeutic purposes, including healing and restorative factors (McKinnon & Bay, 2013). Heinsch (2012) summarises the benefits of exposure to the natural environment for therapeutic purposes including positive impacts on emotional health, physical health and social interactions. Social work practice examples involving the natural environment include wilderness therapy (Tucker, Norton, Itin, Hobsen & Alvarez, 2016), gardening (Donna & Glicksman, 2013), and animal companionship (Taylor, Fraser, Signal & Prentice, 2016). Elsewhere, literature refers to the benefits of the natural environment as contributing to increased cognitive functioning (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008), higher self-esteem and mood levels (Pretty, Peacock, Sellens & Griffin, 2005), calming effects (Van den Berg, Koole & Van der Wulp, 2003), decreases in intra-family violence and aggression (Kuo & Sullivan, 2001) and decreases in stress, anxiety and depression (Nielsen & Hansen, 2007). Specific groups have also been identified as experiencing positive benefits from contact with the natural environment, including people from lower socio-economic groups (Maas, Verheij, Groenewegen, de Vries, & Spreeuwenberg, 2006), older people (Mooney & Nicell, 1992) and children (Kellert, 2002). Although a motivation for pursuing human benefits could be critiqued as human-centred or self-serving, integrating the natural environment for therapeutic purposes promotes an appreciation for the natural environment, which has the potential to build social capital and stewardship capacities (Buris, 2007).
Theoretical approaches affirming the natural environment

Authors arguing for an ecologically centred approach in social work contend the profession should move towards recognition of the natural environment by broadening the conventional sociocultural meaning of the environment to include the natural environment. For example, Norton (2012) and Phillip and Reisch (2015) have advocated for an expanded view of sociocultural positions, at least as a starting point, through systems and ecological perspectives. The extension of this established sociocultural approach provides a relatively uncomplicated way forward for fostering an understanding of the link between human well-being and the natural environment. While this may be a useful starting point, many authors agree that an ecologically centred approach is more than an add-on or expansion of existing or conventional social work methodologies. Rather than pursuing one-dimensional and simplistic change, it is argued in this thesis that ecologically centred social work represents a paradigmatic shift away from Euro-Western philosophies, towards an understanding of humans as an interconnected part of the natural world (Gray & Coates, 2015).

Critical social work provides a structural analysis of the environmental crisis by understanding that the impact of climate change has also exacerbated social inequalities and structural injustices within broader society. Contemporary social work literature focusing on the relationship between humans and the natural environment has closely aligned with critical social work approaches (Pease & Nipperess, 2016). For example, Dominelli (2012a; 2013) builds on radical and anti-oppressive approaches to critique capitalism and structural inequalities for causing environmental degradation; Närhi and Matthies (2016b) discuss an ecosocial approach as a framework for structural social work; Alston (2013), Bell (2013) and Norton (2012) draw from ecofeminism to highlight the disparities and injustices women experience as a result of climate change; and Coates (2005) and Ife (2013) critique modernity and the prevailing economic ideology in the form of neoliberalism for causing environmental degradation through the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources. These critical approaches enable consideration of the political nature of climate change, such as the domination of powerful groups within society that influence or perpetuate social and environmental injustice.
Ecofeminism is of particular significance for developing social work’s relationship with the natural environment. Ecofeminism is both a ‘green’ and ‘feminist’ theory, which combines ecological and feminist principles to explain the environmental crisis (Cudworth, 2003). Ecofeminist authors expose patriarchal structures as the common source of environmental and social problems and critique the male-domination of scientific knowledge as objectifying both women and the natural environment (see for example, Datar, 2011; Nhanenge, 2011; Shiva, 2010). Various aspects are emphasised differently; for example, some authors acknowledge an affinity with the natural environment as fundamental to ecofeminism, which holds that women, as a socially disadvantaged group, have an added understanding of the oppression of the natural environment by patriarchal structures (Cudworth, 2003). Other ecofeminist authors emphasise the effects of dominant social institutions on women and the environment; for example, Euro-Western colonisation (Shiva, 2010), capitalism, and the gendered division of labour (Merchant, 1992). Plumwood (1993) attempts to connect the oppressive dualisms, such as public/private, human/nature, male/female and civilised/uncivilised, by critiquing the rationality of Euro-Western culture, which she refers to as the “master story” (p. 190). Drawing from ecofeminism, social work writers have explored: theory and philosophy (Bell, 2013; Besthorn & McMillan, 2002; Dominelli, 2012a; Hoff & Polack, 1993; Norton, 2012); disaster recovery (Alston, 2013); food security (Phillips, 2009); and, rurality (Alston, 2007; 2010, 2012) as a way forward for developing an understanding of ecosocial work.

Indigenous worldviews, based on a deep spiritual connection with the natural environment, provide insight for cultivating an interdependent association with the natural environment (Coates et al, 2006; Gray & Coates, 2016). As custodians of the land, many Indigenous peoples historically used sustainable practices of caring for country, which incorporated a holistic and interdependent understanding of all living organisms (Zapf, 2009). However, more than simply caring for country, many Indigenous worldviews are underpinned by spiritual and religious beliefs that view Earth as sacred (Voigt & Drury, 1998). In many parts of the world, such as Australia, European colonisation replaced these practices with unsustainable land use, compounded by pursuits for prosperity and economic growth. As a result, Indigenous knowledges were subordinated and became marginalised. Today, much of the Euro-
Western world, including within the practice of social work, continues to discount Indigenous ways of knowing and healing (Coates et al., 2006; Zapf, 2009). Although many social workers are sympathetic to the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples in society, many may be unaware of the subtle ‘colonisation’ processes taking place within contemporary social work (Bennett, 2015; Bennet, Zubrzycki & Bacon, 2011; Walter et al, 2013). Social work authors advocate for the deconstruction of dominant ideologies and for the incorporation of Indigenous worldviews into ecologically centred social work, including Coates et al., (2006), Gray and Coates (2016), Housten and Gray (2016) and Baike (2015).

Another theoretical approach influential in fostering a relationship with the natural environment is deep ecology, which promotes a deep awareness of the interdependence between humans and the natural world (Besthorn, 2012; Besthorn & Canda, 2002). Deep ecology was first coined by Arne Naess (1973) to distinguish a deeply experiential and spiritual connection with the natural world from other forms of environmentalism, which were considered to be based on utilitarian perspectives. Although proponents of deep ecology have emphasised various aspects, most focus on the communion or inseparability of human and nonhuman species relations (Cudworth, 2003). While other green theories might also make this claim, deep ecologists have an ontological understanding that all humans are animals, and exist as one (and are equal) with all other living organisms. Influenced by a number of religious traditions, including Eastern mysticism, deep ecologists accept a broadened view and a deep understanding of the self as universally belonging to a larger cosmos (Besthorn, 2012). Fox (1984) argues for a move away from human-centred or anthropocentric perspectives of the world to an ‘ecocentric’ conceptualisation of the world and contends that human domination over the natural environment has caused environmental havoc. According to social work authors (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Besthorn & McMillan, 2002; Besthorn, 2012; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015), deep ecology has principles and practices that provide insight for developing an ecologically centred social work approach.
Social work’s paradox: Modernity and the natural environment

‘Modernism’ is a term used to describe a philosophical movement arising from changes in sociocultural attitudes and beliefs, which support modern Euro-Western society (Cudworth, 2003). Beginning in the 15th century with transitional movements such as the Reformation, Enlightenment and Renaissance, modernism reflects a period in the late 19th and 20th centuries where an attitudinal shift questioned long-held values associated with fatalism (Alston & Besthorn, 2012). This questioning of tradition brought new values relating to rationality, logic and positivism as foundational to the development of new knowledge, as well as beliefs associated with humanism and freedom of expression. As a result, many of the foundations of modern Euro-Western society, such as individualism, nation states, industrialisation, technological progress, capitalism, urbanisation and the market economy, were developed (Cudworth, 2003; Hugman, 2010). For the purposes of this discussion, Euro-Western society refers to the group of nations which share this common social and cultural history, and which now hold similar traditional customs, political systems and ethical values. Although Euro-Western societies originated in parts of Europe, modern Euro-Western societies have expanded across the world due to colonisation and immigration from Europe to other parts of the world, such as the United States, Australia and Canada.

While modernism initially enabled elements of freedom and self-determination for some people; for example, the opportunity to disentangle from long-held and sometimes oppressive traditions, a modernist worldview is today critiqued for philosophical assumptions associated with the misuse and exploitation of the natural environment (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Washington, 2013). Under modernism, positivist assumptions view the natural environment as an objective entity which is independent or separate from humans. Scientific approaches for advancing modern society have therefore emphasised the use of the natural environment as something to be exploited for fulfilling human progress, needs and wants (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). Propelled by a desire for economic growth and financial prosperity, coupled with an increasing worldwide population, human activities since the industrial revolution have caused massive changes to Earth’s ecosystems (IPCC, 2014). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (WHO, 2005) found that nearly all of the world’s ecosystems, including natural undisturbed (e.g. rainforests, waterways) and natural
manmade (e.g. agricultural land, urban areas), have been changed due to human action particularly over the last 50 years. The Assessment reports that approximately 60 per cent of these ecosystems are being used unsustainably, which is drastically affecting the quality and future of human existence, such as food and water supply, climate regulation, air quality and leisure activities. These outcomes demonstrate that the notion of humans having the inherent right to exploit the natural environment is fundamentally flawed, given that Earth’s natural resources are finite.

Contemporary authors suggest that this modernist worldview, often associated with Euro-Western culture, is deeply embedded into many of our modern institutions, including business, government, science, academia and the media (Washington, 2013). Indeed, many environmental scientists who claim to protect the natural environment have a deeply anthropocentric value-base, which emphasises the need for natural resources in order to satisfy human wants, rather than a holistic view emphasising the intrinsic value of an interconnected natural world. Daly (2007) suggests that decision makers are asking the wrong questions with regard to climate change; for example, ‘What will be the economic costs associated with climate change?’, rather than asking questions associated with basic first principles. Castro (2004) critiques the definition of sustainable development adopted by international organisations, such as the United Nations and the World Bank, which he argues are synonymous with capitalist development and principles of continued economic growth (see Chapter 4, Publication 9 for a more detailed discussion). Nevertheless, some advocate that while capitalism is the problem, it is also the solution through the development of a more eco-efficient economy and corporate social responsibility principles (Brown, 2006; Hawken, 1994; Shellenberger & Nordhaus, 2007). This approach is critiqued for piecemeal efforts from businesses that may be more concerned with reputation and avoiding negative media, rather than progressing more radical change (Blewitt, 2015).

Like many of our modern institutions, social work was also formed during the modernist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries (Ferreira, 2010). Webb (2007) asserts that understanding the history of social work as developing within the “complex cultural system of modernity” is critical for reconciling present day issues within the profession (p. 39). The attitudinal shifts occurring within Europe at the time; for example, the developing importance of independence and self-reliance, as well as
the quest to improve one’s situation, formed part of the sociocultural and economic dimensions of charity work espoused by social workers during this time (Webb, 2007). These modernist assumptions have been incorporated into contemporary Euro-Western social work, including individualism, industrialisation and capitalism. Various social work authors, such as Coates (2005), Ferreira (2010) and Ife (2013) have argued that social work is at odds with developing an environmentally sustainable society, due to pervasive modernist roots associated with industrial capitalism. These authors contend that increasing participation in the welfare state, and working towards full employment, unwittingly supports capitalism, which is critiqued for causing environmental degradation through the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources (Coates, 2003; Ferreira, 2010; Ife, 2013). Consequently, the co-dependency between social work and the welfare state represents a major dilemma for the profession currently in transition towards a more ecologically centred stance. This analysis corresponds with criticisms made by Bell (2013; 2012) concerning the inconsistency between social work’s ontological base grounded in modernism, and many of social work’s epistemological concepts, involving critical and anti-oppressive approaches. Together, these authors highlight a major paradox in the profession, which challenges social work to reconcile inherent problems associated with modernist assumptions.

Conceptualising ecosocial work

Social work that places the natural environment as central to the profession has been associated with various expressions to mark it as distinct from conventional practice, including green social work (Dominelli, 2012a), environmental social work (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2013), ecosocial work (Molyneux, 2010; Peeters, 2012) and holistic environmental perspectives (Gray & Coates, 2015). The meanings of these specific terms vary according to each author. For example, Coates et al., (2006) differentiate between ecosocial work and ecological social work by associating the former with a holistic and “ecospiritual” approach, which reflects Indigenous ways of knowing; whereas the latter is described as “anthropocentric” and individualistic (p. 388). Dominelli’s (2012a) definition of green social work builds on radical and anti-oppressive theoretical approaches in social work by critiquing dominant patriarchal and capitalist discourses as the cause of environmental inequality and unequal power relationships. Dominelli contrasts green social work with environmental social work by
associating the latter with a non-political systems approach within mainstream social work (p. 25). Further, Gray and Coates (2015) adopt the term ‘holistic’ to differentiate from human-centred approaches in social work. They advocate that the term ‘holistic’ avoids ambiguity with conventional terms such as ‘ecological’ and ‘environmental perspective’, which traditionally have a sociocultural basis. This thesis identifies two distinct strands associated with an ecologically centred approach in social work – one that regards ‘ecological’ and the ‘environment’ as a mere extension of the traditional sociocultural perspective of the environment, and one that transcends this view by seeking a deeper approach to ecological change. The term adopted in this thesis to identify with this latter approach is ‘ecosocial work’.

Despite the various terms used to identify ecosocial work, there is collective agreement among scholars about some of the characteristics of ecosocial work. An ecologically centred approach in social work endeavours to protect the natural environment and take a stance toward finding solutions to address ecological and social problems (Alston & Besthorn, 2012). By understanding human well-being as fundamentally linked with the natural environment, ecosocial work represents a distinct move away from a sociocultural emphasis on the environment to a more holistic understanding of humans as an interdependent part of the natural world (Besthorn, 2012, Gray & Coates, 2015). Not only is human well-being dependent on the health of Earth’s ecosystems, but also on the fact that all living organisms share an interconnected dependency on having a healthy ecosystem. Values relating to environmental sustainability, such as holism and ecological justice, are introduced to provide impetus for pro-environmental activities within the profession (Dominelli, 2013; Ramsay & Boddy, 2016). Finally, a critical lens in ecosocial work reveals the structural nature of climate change, such as industrial capitalism (Coates, 2005) and patriarchy (Bell, 2013), which cause associated social inequalities (Närhi & Matthies, 2016b). These attributes of ecosocial work represent some of the main features common among scholars within this emerging tradition.

However, some of the above characteristics reveal tensions with social work’s conventional knowledge base. The profession’s inherent relationship with modernity brings to light contradictions with the emerging conceptualisation of ecosocial work, which opposes modernist assumptions associated with individualism, consumerism
and economic growth (see for example, Bell, 2013; Coates, 2005, Gray & Coates, 2015). These modernist assumptions are embedded within social work in various ways, including the profession’s co-dependent relationship with a capitalist welfare state (Ife, 2013) and emphasis on humanistic principles, such as human rights and social justice (Besthorn, 2013b). These contradictions pose questions for the conceptualisation of ecosocial work and suggest the profession needs to consider a way forward for addressing these anomalies. This thesis aims to explore how an ecosocial approach can be enhanced in social work education and practice, and identifies key concepts and associated issues for the developing conceptualisation of ecosocial work. Specific research questions arising from this literature review are:

- What strategies can be explored to enhance an ecologically centred approach in social work education?
- What strategies can be explored to enhance an ecologically centred approach in social work practice?
- What are the key elements and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work?

The following chapter describes the research design and strategies employed to address these research questions.
Chapter 3: Research design

Introduction

This chapter describes the research design, and the various strategies employed to address the three research questions. My chosen research paradigm is introduced first to explain the ontology and epistemology underpinning the research. The theoretical approach that provided a lens for implementing the methodology, including the collection and analysis of information gathered, is described. Following this, the research methodologies and associated methods are summarised and described in detail according to each publication.

As a portfolio of publications, data from the research were gathered using a range of research methodologies. This chapter also critically discusses the process and application of these research methodologies and the limitations and ethical considerations of the overall research design. This critical reflexive process reveals how my conceptual understanding grew over time and was recorded throughout the various publications. By placing a critical lens on my own work, I have endeavoured to provide a balanced and comprehensive retrospective deliberation about the research design.

Research paradigm

A research paradigm represents a worldview of foundational assumptions which define for a person their basic belief system (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). A research paradigm characterises a set of first principles involving the nature of the world, a person’s place in the world, and the relationships that exist in the world (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). These attributes can be summarised by asking three fundamental questions that depict ontology (what is the nature of the world?), epistemology (how is knowledge created?) and methodology (how can the inquirer find out what needs to be known?) (Scotland, 2012). The three major research paradigms discussed in Euro-Western literature include positivist, constructivist and critical paradigms. Research paradigms also include pragmatic (Creswell, 2013) and Indigenous (Chilisa, 2012) paradigms, among others. Each paradigm represents different assumptions, although upon deeper analysis there is often some overlap of concepts. The research paradigm
adopted in this thesis to correspond with my social work ontology and to address my research objectives, was a critical research paradigm (Guba & Lincoln, 2004), consisting of a qualitative research approach.

Rationale for research paradigm

The rationale for my research paradigm is rooted in my ontological and epistemological beliefs. That is, my view of reality (ontology) and the meaning I ascribe to knowledge and its creation (epistemology) are fundamental to developing the research methodology. Research design that is dominated by methods; for example, sampling and collection of data, often neglects consideration of the underlying philosophical assumptions of the researcher (Darlaston-Jones, 2007; Staller, 2012). According to Guba and Lincoln (2004), the research methodology should be consistent with the researcher’s ontological and epistemological positions. A congruent and coherent philosophical position, which reflects a critical stance and a socially constructed understanding of power relations in society, was therefore important for developing my own ethical approach to social work research.

The dominance of the positivist paradigm in research means that all things are not equal when starting out as a qualitative researcher. The privileging of the positivist paradigm has become embedded into research institutions, which creates barriers and confusion for novice qualitative researchers (Darlaston-Jones, 2007). Steinmetz (2005) referred to this persistent built-in preference for positivist research as “epistemological unconsciousness”, which has come to influence disciplines, and shape institutions and culture (p. 109). Staller (2012) argues it is imperative for qualitative researchers to understand the relationship between ontology, epistemology and methodology in order to successfully negotiate the dominant positivist paradigm embedded in the research institutions we engage with, including funding bodies, ethics committees and peer review processes. Consequently, I have chosen to discuss my research design within the philosophical dimensions of ontology, epistemology and methodology to provide a rationale for my chosen research design and to enhance an ethical and consistent research approach. Table 2 provides a summary of my research design.
Table 2: Research design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ontology</th>
<th>Historical realism</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epistemology</td>
<td>Subjectivism and societal ideology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research paradigm</td>
<td>Critical paradigm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical lens</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology(s)</td>
<td>Dialogic and dialectical methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Grounded theory, critical phenomenology, program evaluations, systematic analysis, content analysis, theory development)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Research ontology

The ontological position underpinning a critical paradigm views reality as historical realism (Creswell, 2013; Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Historical realism is the view that reality has been shaped by social, political and cultural systems. That is, reality exists; however, it has been changed over time due to power differences in society which have created oppressive systems that are now mistaken to be real (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Society is consequently divided and marred by social inequality. As a result, this perceived reality must be critically examined to gain a better understanding of how things really exist (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Language serves to shape reality and can be used to empower or weaken individuals due to the power relations that make up language (Scotland, 2012). These attributes of historical realism characterise the ontological position of a critical research paradigm.

The ontological position of historical realism understands that the natural environment is influenced by dominant social, political and cultural systems, which have caused environmental and social injustice. Particularly since the industrial revolution, the pursuit of economic growth has resulted in the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources, which has disproportionately impacted the world’s poorest citizens (IPCC, 2014; UNEP, 2014; WHO, 2005). The pre-eminence of positivism has developed a culture of domination and control over the natural environment, particularly in Euro-Western nations, which has undermined the health and well-being of natural ecosystems and negatively impacted the world’s poorest citizens (Bell, 2013;
Plumwood, 2002). For example, in pursuit of profits, transnational corporations have exercised their power to misuse natural resources, and source cheap labour in poor countries, causing environmental and social inequality (Campbell, 2009). Corporate ownership and control of the media has further reduced public access to or distorted, this truth, thereby limiting accountability and awareness about the exploitation occurring (Campbell, 2009).

The ontological position of historical realism is evident throughout the portfolio of publications (Publications 1-9). With the aim of enhancing an ecosocial approach in social work, these publications acknowledge the importance of conceptualising ecosocial work within the broader context of dominant social, cultural, economic and political systems. In particular, gender differences were explored to uncover the experiences of rural women in Australia (Publications 5 and 6); a global perspective was adopted to understand social work’s worldwide citizenship responsibilities, particularly towards poorer countries (Publications 1, 2, 4 and 9); and, a holistic approach challenged positivist assumptions of objectivity towards the natural environment (Publications 7, 8 and 9). Further, critical reflection was employed to develop a multidimensional approach consisting of political, social and cultural dimensions to address food insecurity (Publication 3). These publications demonstrate aspects of the ontological position of critical realism.

**Research epistemology**

The epistemological position underpinning a critical paradigm consists of subjectivism and societal ideology (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Scotland, 2012). This position understands knowledge to be both socially constructed and influenced by power relations from within society (Guba & Lincoln, 2005; Scotland, 2012). Not all knowledge is therefore gained through understanding oppressed views (subjectivism) of reality, which have been hidden or distorted by dominant societal structures (societal ideology). This position understands the world to be fundamentally fragmented and characterised by inequality (Scotland, 2012). The researcher gains information and knowledge through interactions with the researched and endeavours to uncover hidden realities of the oppressed; therefore, knowledge is gained from subjective and value-laden information (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). Creswell (2013) states
that the epistemological assumption underpinning how knowledge is gained in qualitative research is through endeavours of the researcher to get as close to the participants as possible in order to gain first-hand information about their experiences. This subjective knowledge has the ability to expose power relations and oppression caused by dominant social structures.

This research has endeavoured to generate knowledge about ecosocial work by increasing an understanding about socially constructed experiences of the environmental crisis and uncovering unequal power relations that cause oppression and environmental injustice. In particular, this research attempted to conceptualise ecosocial work in such a way that enables educators and practitioners to use an epistemological approach which merges elements of subjectivism and societal ideology. For example, if practitioners are able to understand the experience of disadvantaged citizens (subjectivism) within the context of dominant social structures that cause inequality (societal ideology), then their ability to empower individuals, promote sustainability and work towards social change will be enhanced. In particular, education strategies emphasising this two-pronged approach focused on global dimensions of the environmental crisis (Publications 1 and 2) and transformative curriculum design (Publications 2 and 9). Additionally, understanding the oppression of women within the context of climate change aimed to explore the experiences of women and those social structures, particularly patriarchy, responsible for causing oppression (Publications 5 and 6). Finally, practice frameworks also specifically highlighted the importance of individual experience and/or disadvantage as well as macro approaches relating to social, political and cultural structures (Publications 3, 4, 7, 8 and 9). These publications demonstrate aspects relating to the epistemological position of subjectivism and power relations in society.

**Theoretical approach**

The key theoretical approach that provided a lens for undertaking the methodology, including the collection and analysis of information gathered, was critical social work. As mentioned, critical social work is an umbrella term used to describe a group of critical social theories, which share a commitment to both personal and structural change (Pease & Nipperess, 2016). These approaches share the understanding that
personal problems are linked with, and caused by, structures in society that determine the power, status and opportunities afforded to different social divisions (Thompson, 2016). Common principles shared by critical social work theories relate to social justice, analysis of power relations, questioning of dominant assumptions, a commitment to working alongside marginalised groups, and emancipatory forms of analysis and action (Allan, 2009). By taking a critical social work theoretical perspective in this research, an understanding of the issues facing individuals and communities in the context of climate change is complemented by an understanding of the wider structural elements, such as politics and capitalism, which shape their experiences.

Elements from postmodernist ideas were also incorporated into a critical social work approach to highlight difference and multiple experiences of particular groups (Allan, 2009). Postmodernism argues that knowledge is open to the interpretation of diverse ideas, which enables consideration of diversity within and across particular groups, including different constructions of people’s experiences (Fook, 2012; Hosken & Goldingay, 2016; Morley, Macfarlane & Ablett, 2014). Postmodernism critiques objective standards, such as those developed by scientific research, and challenges the privileging of professional knowledge (Connolly & Harms, 2013). For example, decolonisation and indigenisation processes involving the deconstruction of colonist roots and the valuing of Indigenous knowledges is an important aspect of developing ecosocial work (Coates et al., 2006; Gray & Coates, 2016). Climate change impacts are also assumed to be experienced in different ways with varying effects on people. This postmodern emphasis on diversity facilitates this research by ensuring approaches accommodate these differences and take account of multiple experiences.

As part of this research, particular social theories were emphasised and/or combined with critical social work theory depending on the project focus (see Table 3). For example, feminism was emphasised for research projects focusing on women (Publications 5 and 6). This enabled consideration of the impact of climate change on women within patriarchal society, including domestic violence situations and extreme disadvantage. Additionally, a strengths perspective was emphasised when focusing on older people to challenge dominant deficit-based approaches and bring to light the strengths, capacities and resources of older people who live sustainable lifestyles (Publication 7).
Research methodology

The methodological position underpinning a critical paradigm consists of dialogic and dialectical approaches (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). These approaches denote the transactional nature of inquiry involving a dialogue between the researcher and participants. In particular, a dialectical approach is aimed at transformative change in understanding the historical development of social structures that cause oppression. By revealing the unequal power relations in society, and a subsequent distorted view of reality, passages for social change opportunities are opened up (Guba & Lincoln, 2004). In the context of enhancing an ecosocial approach in social work, this research aimed to identify issues relating to ecosocial work and to develop strategies that address the disproportionate impacts of the environmental crisis within the context of dominant social structures.

A range of methodologies was adopted to explore the overall research objectives, including grounded theory, phenomenology, program evaluations, critical reflective supervision, systematic review, content analysis, and theory development. These methodologies formed the strategies for the research methods. Research methods refer to how the data was collected; for example, through interviews and snowball sampling techniques. The methodologies and associated methods within the research process are summarised in Table 3 and will now be applied to the publications and examined within the context of the overall research design. This discussion critiques the application of the research methodologies and provides a critical reflective lens on how my learning developed.
Table 3: Methodology and associated methods details

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Publication Title</th>
<th>Theoretical perspective informing methods</th>
<th>Methodology</th>
<th>Methods</th>
<th>Data collection</th>
<th>Sampling</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program.</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Program evaluation</td>
<td>Pre and post surveys, reflective workshop notes</td>
<td>Purposive</td>
<td>18</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Program evaluation</td>
<td>Online Wiki responses</td>
<td>Purposive</td>
<td>31</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Exploring food security in social work field education: Analysis of a food relief program.</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Critical reflective supervision</td>
<td>Journal notes, meeting minutes</td>
<td>N/A (Co-inquirers)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic analysis using multidimensional framework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Content analysis</td>
<td>Professional codes of ethics</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective.</td>
<td>Feminist theory</td>
<td>Grounded theory</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Gender and climate change in Australia: A review of differences.</td>
<td>Feminist theory</td>
<td>Systematic review</td>
<td>Literature, journal articles, reports</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders</td>
<td>Strengths perspective</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Phenomenology</td>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Snowball</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Thematic analysis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Developing ecological social work for micro level practice</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Conceptual analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>A transformative eco-social model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work</td>
<td>Critical social work</td>
<td>Theory development</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>Conceptual analysis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Publication 1: Program evaluation**

Program evaluation in social work is an important form of research to enhance effective practice (Alston & Bowles, 2013). The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of a short-term study abroad program to India. A program was designed to facilitate social work student learning, including experiential activities, educational workshops, and critical reflection; and then to evaluate whether the program was effective in improving student understanding about environmental sustainability within an international context. Although program evaluations simply evaluate and do not seek to uncover power relations in society, the purpose of the program itself was to enhance the capacity of students, and thereby practitioners, to uncover societal structures that cause environmental and social inequalities; therefore aspects relating to a critical research paradigm were essential in the development of the program and in evaluating the effectiveness of the program. The aim was to ensure the study abroad program did not perpetuate Euro-Western colonial and imperial values related to modernist thinking; for example, in relation to environmental degradation, poverty and gender inequality. A summary outlining the methodological details of the research is provided in Table 4.

Table 4: Summary of methodological details for Publication 1 - Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program

| Title: Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program |
|---------------------------------|---------------------------------|
| **Methodology:** | Program evaluation |
| **Data collection** | Pre and post surveys, reflective workshop notes |
| **Sampling** | Purposive |
| **Number of participants** | 18 |
| **Analysis** | Thematic analysis |

The methodology described in this publication referred to employing a ‘mixed methods’ approach, consisting of reflective workshops and surveys containing simple scaling questions. A mixed methods approach refers to a methodology involving the
use of both qualitative and quantitative methods of data collection in a single study (Alston & Bowles, 2013). While many authors argue for the benefits of a mixed methods approach, on reflection the scaling question used in this research would be better described as a ‘brief solution’ approach. This analysis implies that a qualitative approach to data collection was actually used, rather than a mixed methods approach. As part of brief solution therapy, the therapist often uses scaling questions to assess a person’s perception of their well-being, progress or motivation for change (de Shazer & Dolan, 2007). In this research, it could be argued that a scaling question often used in therapy was adapted to assess student perceptions of their growth and learning upon completion of the program. This latter understanding fits more comfortably with the authors’ preferred philosophical assumptions.

**Publication 2: Program evaluation**

The purpose of this research was to evaluate the effectiveness of an online pilot program developed for social work students to enhance their understanding about the environmental crisis and associated social injustices, including ideas for improving future programs. Similar to the program evaluated in Publication 1, the purpose of this second program was educative and aimed to enhance the capacity of students, and therefore future practitioners, to uncover societal structures that cause environmental and social inequalities. Thus it was essential to include aspects of a critical research paradigm in both the development of the program and in evaluating its effectiveness. Table 5 outlines the methodological details of the program evaluation in Publication 2.

Table 5: Summary of methodological details for Publication 2 - Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Methodology</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Data collection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sampling</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of participants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A major critique of the online education program was that it commenced towards the end of the calendar year, which may have inhibited the capacity of students to participate. In my experience as a lecturer in social work, students often feel increasingly stressed by the pressure to complete assignment tasks towards the end of the calendar year, including in many cases field education (also termed workplace learning or practicum) commitments. The online education program represented additional workload for students, and offered no reward (or grade) for student participation. It is therefore likely that students with a low awareness or concern about environmental sustainability did not volunteer to participate. Nevertheless, the recruitment of 31 students undertaking a qualifying degree in social work provided substantial data to evaluate the program, especially as a pilot program with the view to developing future programs.

**Publication 3: Critical reflective supervision**

Critical reflective supervision is a process whereby field educators work towards developing the capacity of students to think critically, for example by questioning dominant social structures that cause oppression and social inequality (Australian Learning & Teaching Council, 2010). The purpose of critical reflective supervision is to enable students to develop the skills required for critical reflexive practice, which refers to a process of identifying (or uncovering) personal assumptions, in order to make changes to professional practice and to the broader context of society (Fook & Gardner, 2007). While critical reflective supervision is not often categorised as a research methodology, the examination of field education as a vehicle for increasing student awareness about the environmental crisis and social change opportunities is integral to the research objectives of this thesis. Arguably, the co-inquiry process in this research involving social work students and field educators represents a cooperative inquiry, which emphasises the participation of all parties in decisions and research processes (Heron, 1996), as evidenced by the multi-authored publication. Nevertheless, the process of uncovering power relationships and structural inequalities corresponds with a critical research paradigm, which sat comfortably with the position of the social work students and field educators undertaking the research. Details summarising the methodology are provided in Table 6.
Using field education as a vehicle for increasing student awareness about the environmental crisis and opportunities for social change presented some difficulties. The AASW Code of Ethics (2010) recognises the natural environment as central to practice, and therefore obligates social workers to consider the natural environment and associated issues, such as food security. However, in practice, the AASW Practice Standards, which are used to identify field education learning goals, do not specify any practice requirements associated with the natural environment. Given that the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) is the foundation document that informs all other AASW documents and policies, it would be expected that the AASW Practice Standards (AASW, 2013) would reflect the principles pertaining to the natural environment and sustainability in the code. Throughout the field education experience, this therefore presented some difficulties with articulating an ecosocial work framework across the practice standards and throughout the field education learning documents, assessment criteria, and administrative processes. Nevertheless, this situation reflects the profession’s current transitional status from an in-principle approach towards an ‘actual’ practice-based ecosocial work approach. As documented in the publication, the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012), which sets out the graduate attributes for social work education, is also yet to reflect this ecosocial transition.
Publication 4: Content analysis

A content analysis examines existing literature or other materials for themes, trends and patterns, and is useful for identifying gaps or missing elements (Alston & Bowles, 2013). The process for content analysis involves: determining a sample; deciding on categories to be employed; determining what is being measured; recording; analysing; and drawing of conclusions (Alston & Bowles, 2013). This research examined three social work national codes of ethics (sample) for content relating to environmental sustainability (categories) and the frequency or extent to which related terms were included in the documents (what is being measured). Outcomes were recorded, analysed within an international context, and recommendations made. A critical approach was adopted as part of the research to consider the gaps in ethical principles and the influence of powerful institutions, such as the IFSW and professional national bodies, in developing ethical and sustainable ecosocial work. Methodological details relating to the content analysis are summarised in Table 7.

Table 7: Summary of methodological details for Publication 4 - Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics

| Title: Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics |
|---|---|
| Methodology: | Content analysis |
| Data collection | Professional codes of ethics |
| Sampling | National codes of ethics (Australia, United Kingdom and United States) |
| Number of participants | N/A |
| Analysis | Thematic analysis |

This research could be critiqued for focusing on codes of ethics in three Euro-Western nations, and consequential neglect of the representation of codes of ethics from across the world. To an extent, comparing codes of ethics between countries who share a common social and cultural history, and which now hold similar traditional customs, political systems and ethical values, enables a clear and systematic analysis process, it also excludes an analysis of how less powerful nations are contributing to
the development of ecosocial work. Fostering global citizenship within social work requires an appreciation for cultural diversity. The contributions made to social work from nations with dissimilar cultures to those included in this research could have provided an opportunity to challenge dominant ideologies within the countries included in this research. Nonetheless, this research represents a starting point for further research into how nations include sustainability into their codes of ethics and other policy documents.

**Publication 5: Grounded theory**

Grounded theory aims to construct theory about social processes through the analysis of descriptive data (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). As the name suggests, grounded theory generates *theory* that has been developed from the *ground* or field (Creswell, 2013), as opposed to predetermined hypotheses developed by the positivist researcher. The distinctive element of grounded theory compared to other qualitative methodologies is that this approach moves beyond the descriptive to develop a theoretical framework that explains a process or action (Charmaz, 2006). Although grounded theory is also known for having some positivist assumptions, such as methodological rules and coding processes (Creswell, 2013), this research adopted a flexible approach, which reflected a qualitative approach to grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006). Additionally, the project employed elements of grounded theory, and did not aspire to any pure approach.

As part of this research, women employed by women’s health services and women activists were interviewed to explore their experiences associated with climate change and possible service and/or policy approaches to address subsequent issues and inequalities (Publication 5). According to Charmaz (2005), a major strength of grounded theory is that this method allows for understanding social justice issues. This approach enables the researcher to explore relationships between human experience and social structures with participants, reflecting the dialectical characteristics of a critical research paradigm. By adopting a social justice approach to grounded theory, this research examined the structural elements associated with women’s experiences. A summary of the research methodology is detailed in Table 8.
Table 8: Summary of methodological details for Publication 5 - Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data collection</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sampling</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of participants</td>
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<td>Analysis</td>
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</table>

Although this research did not aspire to apply a purist approach to grounded theory, it could be critiqued for neglecting to commit to the full research process espoused by the approach, which involves the continued collection and analysis of data based on previously derived concepts (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). In particular, theoretical sampling refers to the cyclical process involving the continued collection of data in response to particular categories developed. This might involve re-interviewing participants or finding new participants who can provide further data about the particular category being developed (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). A sample of just seven participants, interviewed in a single session, arguably did not meet these requirements. For example, it might have been useful to further explore the category relating to women’s propensity for pro-environmental behaviour. Arguably however, it was also unrealistic to explore every category in detail, and a separate research project may better explore this particular category.

Also, components for theory development were gathered and reported upon, but not arranged into a coherent theory representative of a framework (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). Further reflection on the absence of a coherent framework which encapsulates the research outcomes, suggests that a service framework for addressing the effects of climate change could have been organised as an outcome of the research findings. The results indicate the potential for the development of a service framework based on the interconnected dimensions of micro (individual), meso (group or organisational) and macro (policy, research and community) social work practice. Nevertheless, this research provided rich data from the experiences of participants and
identified a range of strategies for addressing the effects of climate change on rural women.

**Publication 6: Systematic review**

A systematic review aims to summarise and organise research evidence relating to a specific topic in a rigorous and transparent way (Alston & Bowles, 2013). The purpose of a systematic review can be to synthesise large quantities of data, disentangle conflicting evidence, make comparisons or identify gaps in the literature. A systematic review also ensures transparency and prevents researchers from narrowly selecting research to support their own perspective or argument (Stewart & Kamins, 1993). A systematic review was undertaken as part of this thesis to analyse evidence in relation to gender and climate change in rural Australia. By applying ontological and epistemological aspects of a critical paradigm, traditional ideology within the literature was questioned through the examination of unequal power relationships. Details summarising the methodology are provided in Table 9.

Table 9: Summary of methodological details for Publication 6 - Gender and climate change in Australia: A review of differences

| Title: Gender and climate change in Australia: A review of differences |
|--------------------------|------------------|
| Methodology:             | Systematic review|
| Data collection          | Literature, journal articles, reports |
| Sampling                 | Australian literature (including five journal articles and four reports) |
| Number of participants   | N/A |
| Analysis                 | Thematic analysis |

While the review of Australian literature provided a defined boundary for the research, exploration in an international context may have extended the analysis and provided a more comprehensive review. Given that the number of Australian documents were so few (five original sources), this approach could have enhanced the data for developing an ecosocial work approach more broadly, within Australia and elsewhere. Nevertheless, this research represents a beginning stage, and could include an international context as part of future research.
Publication 7: Phenomenology

Phenomenology aims to ascertain the meaning of individuals’ lived experiences and establish universal meanings or common themes associated with that experience (Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of phenomenology is to develop a generic understanding of phenomena by focusing on the common elements between participants. According to Crotty (1998), phenomenology is far more than a study of people’s everyday experiences, but rather an exercise of “critique” (p. 83). By putting aside current understandings of culture that impose limitations for accepting new knowledge, a phenomenological researcher attempts to recover unmarked reality. For this research, a critical phenomenological approach was adopted to explore how older Australians live sustainably. In particular, the dominant view of older people as passive recipients of services was set aside in order to uncover a fresh reality. A summary outlining the methodological details is outlined in Table 10.

Table 10: Summary of methodological details for Publication 7 - Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Title: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders</th>
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<tr>
<td>Methodology</td>
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<td>Data collection</td>
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<td>Sampling</td>
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The integration of phenomenology and criticality for this research provided an innovative and complementary qualitative research approach. Hood (2016) contends that critical realism provides the ontological and epistemological framework for integrating critical methodologies with other qualitative approaches. He asserts that data gained from more than one perspective may more comprehensively address research questions, and provide greater depth and credibility of results. Dialectical conversations with participants in this project allowed for open discussion about structures in society, such as government policy and conservative culture, which prevent sustainable living. This is also evidenced by the common theme identified among participants about the importance of community involvement and political
action. Arguably, the integration of methodologies could be considered a pragmatist approach to research, where the use of multiple methods is adopted based on the problem being researched and the outcomes of that research (Creswell, 2013). In this instance, combining methodologies within this research did not require the use of philosophically opposed methods; rather a merging of qualitative methods, phenomenology and criticality, enhanced a critical phenomenological approach for data collection.

**Publication 8: Theory development**

The development of theory forms an important part of this thesis to further develop the conceptualisation of an ecologically centred approach in social work. Ecosocial work strategies at the micro level of practice involved integrating key ecosocial themes of sustainability and environmental justice, posed as questions, with foundational social work processes and methods. Social work has a range of *processes and methods* that inform practice and provide procedures or stages for social work practice in various contexts (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). The process of the helping relationship was selected for this research to identify and develop ecosocial work strategies for casework practice.

The conceptualisation of theory is not regarded as empirical research, which means the methodological process for undertaking the development of this framework cannot be scrutinised in the same way as the previous publications. However, the ecosocial strategies developed in this publication need to be tested and scrutinised in the practice context. Table 11 summarises the methodological approach used to develop this theoretical framework.

<table>
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<th>Table 11: Summary of methodological details for Publication 8 - Developing ecological social work for micro level practice</th>
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<td><strong>Title:</strong> Developing ecological social work for micro level practice</td>
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<td><strong>Methodology:</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Analysis</strong></td>
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Publication 9: Theory development

The conceptualisation of a transformative ecosocial model for social work formed the culmination of this thesis. By synthesising social work literature in conjunction with research results from this thesis, a philosophical base for ecosocial work was constructed as a starting point for further developments within the profession. This end stage of the research was challenging, yet deeply satisfying to be able to draw together the different facets of multiple research projects. For example, all major key themes identified and/or areas of focus explored in this research were included as an integral part of the transformative ecosocial model developed in this final publication for the thesis (Publication 9), including: gender (Publications 1 and 6); strategies for living sustainably (Publication 2); global citizenship (Publications 3 and 4); multidimensional aspects for addressing food insecurity (Publication 5); ethical practice (Publication 7); and, micro practice strategies (Publication 8).

As was the case for the previous publication (Publication 8), this final publication conceptualises a theoretical model to further the development of ecosocial work, and is not empirical research. However, the publication is open for debate by scholars in the field, and needs to be tested and scrutinised in the practice context. This lack of experiential application in practice indicates the need for further research to develop the model. Table 12 summarises details of the research.

Table 12: Summary of methodological details for Publication 9 - A transformative ecosocial model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work

| Title: A transformative eco-social model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work |
|---------------------------------------------|------------------|
| Methodology:                          | Theoretical development |
| Data collection                      | N/A               |
| Sampling                             | N/A               |
| Number of participants               | N/A               |
| Analysis                             | Conceptual analysis |
Limitations of research design

Acknowledging limitations of the research undertaken as part of this thesis enables consideration of its usefulness to social work and is strongly advisable practice for an author advocating a critically reflective approach. This section provides a summary of the broad limitations which are applicable to the overall research design. In addition, each publication presented in the following chapter also includes details about the specific limitations for each project identified at the time of writing and publication.

Neglected voices

Although this research engaged with a range of stakeholders involved in professional social work, such as social work students, practitioners and older people, the research could have further engaged with less powerful individuals and groups in order to uncover the experience of people with ‘unheard’ or silenced voices. In particular, only one known Aboriginal person participated in the research (see Publication 2). Although other participants could have identified as Aboriginal, the research did not specifically engage with Indigenous groups. The incorporation of Indigenous worldviews is critical for the development of ecosocial work, particularly in relation to holistic and interdependent conceptualisations of the natural world, as well as sustainable strategies that might be applicable to social work and wider society. Additionally, the participation of Aboriginal peoples is important for inclusion and empowerment of Aboriginal peoples, as part of ethical social work research. Specifically, the people who were engaged as participants and co-inquirers in the research process included:

- service providers and women activists (Publication 1)
- older people who live sustainable lifestyles (Publication 2)
- social work students (Publications 3, 4, 5)

Although five out of nine publications representing the research engaged with various stakeholders in professional social work, only one out of nine engaged with people not professionally attached to welfare and human services through employment or education. This publication (Publication 2), which focused on older people who live sustainable lifestyles, could represent people who might access social work services. However, this limited number of participants from wider society means that the voices of institutions, the researcher and people in powerful positions were
privileged, and thus the people social work aims to empower were neglected. Nevertheless, at these early stages of developing ecosocial work, it is hoped that the ideas and strategies conceptualised offer starting points for further research and together form just one part of an ongoing research agenda about ecosocial work.

**Lack of action-oriented research**

Although this research called for change to occur within society and the profession, little action took place via way of collaborative efforts and political participation. According to Alston and Bowles (2013), social work research differs from other forms of social research. While social research in general has a systematic approach to exploring social phenomena, *social work* research involves qualities that reflect professional objectives, including action for change, criticality, application of social work values (for example social justice and human rights), and the integration of research and practice. This research adopted all of these professional objectives, apart from social action. However, it could be argued that the publications may prompt discussion and development within social work, which may lead to future change within the profession aimed at ameliorating the disproportionate impacts of the environmental crisis.

**Subjective involvement of researcher**

The involvement of the researcher in theory building, data collection and analyses processes was subjective, which means my own values and experiences influenced the analysis process (Denscombe, 2010). Although this may be seen as a limitation to research in terms of ‘researcher bias’ (to borrow a term from more quantitative approaches), it can be counter-argued that reflexivity enabled me to scrutinise my role when engaging with participants in interviews and workshops. This involved consideration of how I interpreted the meanings of the experiences of the participants and how my own experience or lens might have affected this interpretation. As a PhD student, I also had the opportunity to share data analysis and discuss complex issues with my supervisors and co-researchers, which provided a check against excessive influence arising from a single researcher and arguably led to a better understanding of the data.
Restricted size and scale of research

The size and scale of research was limited with small numbers of participants engaged in specific projects, ranging from four to thirty one. This small number of participants affected the size of data, which reduced the capacity for identifying common elements as part of the thematic analysis processes. Nevertheless, as exploratory research, no matter how small the resultant data, it holds value in the meaning and interpretations ascribed.

Transferability of research findings

Finally, as an Australian study, this research might not have relevance to international contexts and ideas, or strategies may not be transferrable to different cultural contexts. Nevertheless, while specific results from various stakeholder groups might not be directly relevant to international contexts, it could be argued that broader social work findings may apply to nations who share a common social and cultural history, and which now hold similar traditional customs, political systems and ethical values. Although the development of a hegemonic social work dominated by Euro-Western values is, in itself, worthy of intense critique, the transferability of findings from this research, at least, has the potential to be carefully applied to some other nations.

Ethical considerations

The appropriate research ethics committees approved all research involving participants (Publications 1, 2, 6 and 7). Ethics applications were submitted through the Arts Faculty Human Ethics Committee and/or the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Committee prior to the research commencing, along with copies of the information sheets (see Appendix 2), consent forms (see Appendix 3), and interview or workshop outlines. In 2014 the National Ethics Application process was introduced and all research projects occurring after this date were processed after completion of a National Ethics Application Form (NEAF). Ethical considerations specific to each research project are described in the corresponding publications presented in the following chapter. The following is a summary of the broad ethical considerations that are not outlined in the publications and which are applicable to research involving participants.
**Code of Conduct**

The research was approached in an ethical manner to ensure the protection and rights of all participants. The code of conduct outlined in the Australian Code for Responsible Conduct of Research (National Health and Medical Research Council [NHMRC], the Australian Research Council [ARC] & Universities Australia, 2007) was adopted as a guide to the research. This code of conduct includes standards relating to: honesty and integrity; respect for human research participants, animals and the environment; good stewardship of public resources used to conduct research; appropriate acknowledgment of the role of others in research; and, responsible communication of research results (p. 1.3, Section 1). University ethics approval gained from the appropriate ethics committee for empirical research, involved a risk assessment and review process, and ensured the research fulfilled the principles and standards outlined above. Additionally, the principles espoused in the AASW Code of Ethics (2010) relating to professional research, informed the research, and included respect, consent and privacy (Section 5.5.2.2).

**Low Risk**

The data gathered focused on information that was not of a personal nature; for example, service provider perspectives of the experience of women, and sustainable living strategies. Ethical concerns arising from the research therefore were not considered high risk since physical safety and psychological sensitivities were not central to the research. As part of the ethics approval process, the university ethics committee confirmed this low risk nature of all the empirical research projects conducted. However, safety processes were developed for situations where participants might disclose personal information during conversations or interviews and subsequently become distressed. These processes usually involved a referral to an appropriate place for support. At the beginning of the research participants were reminded to refrain from sharing confidential information about themselves or others and were advised to discuss case study examples anonymously.

**Voluntary Participation and Informed Consent**

Participation in all research was voluntary and prospective participants were provided with information in writing about the research in order to make a decision about
involvement, including the research purpose, commitment and use of information. Informed consent in writing was a requirement before participation, and the right to withdraw from the research at any time without censure was guaranteed as part of the recruitment process. All research information and consent forms for participants are provided in Appendices 2 and 3. This approach promoted autonomy and self-determination, which in turn reflects principles for research outlined in Section 5.52 of the AASW Code of Ethics.

**Confidentiality and Anonymity**

Information disclosed throughout the research was treated as confidential, and anonymity of individuals and organisations was maintained in published documents, unless otherwise negotiated in writing or when referring to matters of public record such as professional codes of ethics. Data were stored securely to ensure confidentiality and to prevent unauthorised access. Paper documents were locked in a filing cabinet and electronic information was password protected on the researcher’s computer, both of which were maintained in a locked office. Original records will be destroyed five years after the research was concluded. Paper documents will be shredded and electronic information will be deleted.

This chapter has described the research design and the various strategies employed to address the research objectives. By placing a critical lens on the research process, I have endeavoured to provide a comprehensive retrospective deliberation about the application of research methodologies. The following chapter will present the portfolio of publications in full-text.
Chapter 4: Portfolio of publications

Introduction

This chapter presents the nine publications that form the heart of this thesis. These nine publications consist of seven journal articles and two book chapters. All publications were peer reviewed and published in scholarly journals, or by quality publishers. Each publication represents a specific aspect of ecosocial work and relates to the research objectives. The order of presentation and a list of the reference details for each publication are provided in the table below (Table 13). Following this table, the full-text of each publication is presented.

Table 13: Reference details for publications

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Publication No.</th>
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**Publication 1: Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program**

Reference details:

*Author Note:* The authors would like to acknowledge the funding received from the Faculty of Arts at Charles Sturt University that aided us in completing the research study. We would also like to acknowledge the India Study Abroad Centre (ISAC) for their support with the program, and the contribution made by the centre to develop a rich learning experience.

**Abstract**

Adopting a critical social work frame of reference, this paper explores the impacts and challenges of a two-week study abroad program to India on Australian social work students’ understanding of the environment in practice. Using a mixed methods approach, a small study was undertaken in 2011 involving pre and post-program
surveys, as well as a facilitated reflective workshop to explore environmental social work. Results are discussed and indicate the program had a positive impact on expanding students’ conventional socio-cultural understanding of the environment and global dimensions of environmental degradation. Whilst this is positive and suggests some justification for the international study abroad program, other questions and challenges are raised relating to complex cultural issues and neo-colonial aspects of study abroad programs.

*Keywords*: Environment, study abroad program, social work education, international social work

**Introduction**

Many social workers are now discussing the implicit role of social work in dealing with the social impacts of global warming (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Lysack, 2012; Peeters, 2012). Global warming refers to an average increase in the earth’s temperature, which can contribute to changes in global climatic conditions. Global warming can occur from both natural and human induced causes, with the latter being attributed to a dramatic increase in greenhouse gas emissions concurrent with the industrial revolution (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007, 2013). There is mounting evidence to suggest that the acceleration of both incremental and sudden climatic events, including drought, bushfires, heat waves, floods and storms are at least partly caused by global warming (Australian Farm Institute, 2007; Climate Commission, 2013; Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2007, 2013).

Whilst climatic events have large-scale economic costs for families and communities, the social impacts can be devastating. Climatic events have produced widespread shortages of food and water (Alston & Kent, 2004), displacement and homelessness (B oversthorns & Myer, 2010), and increases in death rates of vulnerable groups, such as those suffering from health conditions (Lam, 2007; McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006). Trauma caused by the experience of climatic events can also trigger significant emotional health issues, such as emotional distress and loss and grief (Dean & Stain, 2010; Morrissey & Reser, 2007), as well as behavioural issues associated with domestic violence and substance abuse (Anderson, 2001; Anderson, Anderson, Dore, DeNeve, & Flanagan, 2000). These social impacts have significant implications for
social work practice and provide an impetus for the profession to work in an environmentally conscious way.

In efforts to incorporate environmental perspectives into social work, some national codes of ethics and guidelines in Western countries, such as Australia (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010) and the United Kingdom (British Association of Social Work [BASW], 2012) have included to varying degrees recognition of the natural environment in revised versions. For example, the terms ‘physical’, ‘natural’, and ‘sustainable’ appear in the latest Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) Code of Ethics a total of five times and specifically relate to protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing (AASW, 2010, Sections 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, & 5.1.3). A further four references to the environment could be read to include, at least in part, considerations of the natural environment (Sections 1.1, 1.2, & 5.1.3). Similarly, the latest BASW Code of Ethics introduced the term ‘natural’ environment in relation to consideration of the whole person, including the context of the natural environment (BASW, 2012, Section 2.1). This further provides a professionally sanctioned responsibility for social workers to practice in an environmentally conscious way.

As a result, social work educators are grappling with ways and means of introducing environmental content into the curriculum. Whilst social work education has traditionally adopted a person-in-environment perspective, this has almost exclusively emphasised a sociocultural focus (McKinnon, 2008). Jones (2013, pp. 217-220) refers to three distinct methods for introducing the natural environment into the social work curriculum, including the ‘bolt-on’ approach, the ‘embedded’ approach, and the ‘transformative’ approach to education. Other authors have explored ideas, such as the provision of an expanded view of systems and ecological theories (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010; McKinnon, 2008); integration of principles of ‘deep’ ecology into curriculum content (Besthorn & Canda, 2002); applying principles of biophilia (Lysack, 2010); the addition of subject electives that focus specifically on sustainability and the environment (Jones, 2013; as well as the need for social workers to reconnect with nature at a personal and emotional level to foster commitment (Lysack, 2010).
Of critical importance to understanding the environment as the context for social work practice is an understanding of the global dimension of social work and recognition of the interconnectedness of environmental degradation between different countries. Dominelli (2010) refers to the ‘internationalisation of social problems’, and calls for a broadening of practice and understanding that local social work practice has international dimensions. This means that social work interventions in one country extend beyond its national borders and are likely to impact the wellbeing of communities in other countries (Dominelli, 2010). Global problems, such as environmental degradation, poverty, financial insecurity, and gender inequality are typical examples of international issues, which to a large degree are the consequence of Euro-Western industrialist and capitalist endeavours for economic growth (Dominelli, 2010, 2012).

Within the context of expanding international and environmental practice in social work, this paper discusses educational outcomes for some Australian social work students who participated in a short-term Study Abroad Program to India in 2011. Using a critical social work frame of reference, this paper explores the impacts of the Study Abroad Program on Australian social work students’ understanding of the environment in practice. Critical theory is used to question the benefits of the program, cultural inequities, and the domination of powerful groups in the development and outcomes of study abroad programs (Fook, 2012; Mendes, 2009).

**Social Work Study Abroad Program**

The Social Work Study Abroad Program was first implemented in 2010 as a partnership between the India Study Abroad Centre (ISAC) based in Mumbai, Charles Sturt University (CSU) social work academics, and CSU Global, a division of the university committed to international exchange. The aims of the program were to enable students to engage in mutual learning opportunities that challenge self-awareness and to develop cross-cultural knowledge. More broadly, the program aimed to provide students with an international experience to strengthen awareness of the global dimensions of social work practice. The inaugural program in 2010 reported several positive impacts on student learning, including an appreciation of international social work, enhanced professional commitment and motivation, increased knowledge about
community development, and the development of ongoing relationships with social justice projects (Bell & Anscombe, 2012). For example, one outcome of the 2010 program was that a student sub-group was successful in securing a small grant of $1500 (AUD) from the CSU Social Justice Fund, for their fieldwork agency (an orphanage) to assist in the completion of ongoing upgrades to the orphanage facilities. Participants in the 2011 program were able to present the grant to the orphanage. Since the 2011 program, further initiatives have been undertaken by CSU academics and students, including securing a university grant to develop a carbon neutral study abroad program and to provide an online learning tool to develop students understanding of environmental perspectives in social work. In 2011, the second Study Abroad Program was undertaken with similar aims, including the continued development of an ongoing relationship between CSU academics and welfare services in the community first visited in 2010. The 2011 program ran for two weeks in mid-November in the same rural village of Malavli, located in the state of Maharashtra, in the Pune district. Malavli is approximately 100 kilometres from Mumbai, the state’s capital, and 60 kilometres from the nearest urban centre of Pune.

**Preparation Phase**

As part of the preparatory phase of the program, an online site was established within the university’s online learning environment. This site was also utilised for academics to maintain communication with students, for students to converse with one another through an online forum and for resources to be added and announcements made about the program and broader topical issues relating to international social work. Before departure, three orientation meetings were undertaken via the synchronous on-line meeting function of this site.

**On-site Phase**

During the first week of the program, students undertook various visits to community and welfare organisations to become familiar with social work and welfare practices in India. In the second week, students attended a community welfare organisation for their fieldwork experience. Organisations included orphanages, village development programs, a sex-worker health organisation, a slum community project, and a
children’s disability organisation. As part of the field placement many students undertook small social work based projects as directed by the organisations, such as writing funding submissions, updating records, developing posters, interacting with service users, observation, conducting needs analyses and reporting. While this fieldwork does not currently count towards students’ formal practicum requirements according to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW), there is recognition on their academic transcript of having completed an international study experience once they have submitted a reflective essay on their study experience.

Day-to-day Support

During the on-site phase of the program, support to students involved ongoing conversations and dialogue to generate student self-exploration and critical reflection, especially in relation to individual or group responses to experiences. Many times the academic facilitators were also experiential learners in these conversations, yet were consciously applying critical reflection techniques to encourage movement from description to transformative learning (Fook & Gardner, 2007). At the end of each day, the three academic facilitators systematically checked with participants, often over dinner, to informally discuss the day’s events and experiences. There were two general feedback and evaluation sessions for the whole group conducted by ISAC and the academic facilitators. In addition, three reflective workshops for students were facilitated as part of the research project and these are discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Research Project

In addition to the experiential learning aspects of the program described above, the academic facilitators received a small university research grant to run a concurrent research project to evaluate the program overall, as well as to explore student perceptions of three key themes: professional identity, gender, and environmental social work. The overall aim of the research was to explore the impacts of the program on students’ understanding of these themes.
The research was conducted with the approval of the appropriate ‘low risk’ ethics committee of the university. Examination of the environmental component of the research formed one part of this larger study, and will be reported on in this paper.

**Methods**

The research question relevant to the environmental component of the study is - ‘has student understanding of the environment been impacted as a result of the international study experience in India and if so, how?’ A mixed methods approach was considered the most appropriate way of achieving some information on students’ pre-program and post-program perceptions of ‘the environment’. Pre-program and post-program written surveys were distributed and three reflective workshops were conducted during the on-site phase of the program.

**The surveys.** Survey data was gathered via simple scale questions, with basic demographic data being gathered via closed, limited response questions. Open questions were also used to gather more detailed responses and to qualify responses to scale questions. There were thirteen items on each survey to capture basic details via closed questions (i.e., age, level of study). More detailed responses (i.e., usually a scale question followed by an open comments opportunity) were also gathered about the level of understanding of human rights, social justice, gender, social work identity, international social work, community development, cultural sensitivity, and the environment in social work.

Data thus gathered provided an indication of the general level of knowledge and any variation in knowledge of ‘environment’ across the group. As per the condition of the ethics approval document, individual student responses to survey questions could not be ‘tracked’ in order to minimise the chance of identifying specific students. Thus, the data analysis is limited to assessing overall trends in the student group, pre-program and post-program.

**The reflective workshops.** There were three workshops during the on-site phase of the program, with each one focusing on a specific research theme (gender, professional identity and the environment). Using Fook & Gardner’s (2007) framework for critical reflection, each workshop group was facilitated following this pattern:
• Introduction of the key theme (gender, social work identity or environment);
• Identification and description of concrete experiences/events/learning incidents (during the study abroad program) relating to the key theme;
• Description of how the experiences impact on understanding of the key theme, including any changes;
• Discussion of how the key theme and experiences relate to social work in general and social work roles in practice in particular.

Each workshop group was divided into self-selected sub-groups of three or four students. Each student sub-group was asked to brainstorm their thoughts, write a detailed process record of their sub-group’s discussion, and then share their group’s discussion with the whole group. Notes were taken on the understanding that they would be collected as part of the research data collection process. Academic facilitators also took detailed process record notes, including verbatim quotations, during each workshop using the critical reflection framework to format their notes. These notes also formed part of the research data.

The reflective workshops, whilst used for research, also served to consolidate reflective learning processes, to deepen students’ awareness of international social work and to encourage transformative learning (Fook & Gardner 2007).

Recruitment and Participation

Eighteen female students from CSU participated in the Study Abroad Program along with three female academics who developed and facilitated the program. Fourteen of the students were undergraduate social work students, two were postgraduate social work students; two were students in generic social science degrees. Students ranged in their current level of study from first to fourth year, and varied in age from early 20’s to mid-60’s.

All 18 students participating in the Study Abroad Program were contacted by letter and invited to voluntarily participate in any part of the research. This invitation was followed up at an on-line meeting prior to the commencement of the program. Sixteen students completed and returned consent forms to participate in the research.
Of these students, variable numbers participated in different components of the research, as detailed below.

**Data Analysis**

Thematic data analysis was undertaken via open coding, axial coding, and selective coding of the data (Ezzy, 2002). Open exploration of data occurred when workshop notes were analysed for recurrent topics. These topics were numbered and arranged into groups where central themes relating to the purposes of the study were identified. For example, comments relating to observations about the physical and natural environment were recurrent, so these comments were identified and positioned within a central theme that related to the aims of the study, in this case ‘not just a socio-cultural environment’. Quotes that most represented common elements and differences were reported on as part of selective coding to magnify the voice of participants in the study. Data from pre-program evaluation and post-program evaluations were also collated according to research topics and organised into relevant themes.

**Study Limitations**

This is an exploratory study involving a small number of participants and as such, there is no claim made as to the representativeness or generalizability of the findings. The study aims instead to provide potentially indicative, exploratory research on an under-researched topic and to make a valuable contribution to this emerging area of research in social work.

An ethical issue for this research was the potential conflict of interest given that the three researchers were also in academic/lecturer positions at the university. This lecturer relationship held with students could have influenced student responses or undermined the voluntary nature of the research. However, at the time of research, none of the researchers were in a direct teaching relationship with the students, and participation in the research had no bearing on any academic results. The researchers also emphasised the voluntary nature of the research, and consequently some of the students who attended the Study Abroad Program did not participate in the research.
The small number of participants involved in the research also raises issues of maintaining confidentiality within a relatively small group of students. However, the researchers received all research data in de-identified form. For example, all electronic responses were sent to the university’s administration e-mail address and then forwarded to the researchers with all identifying details removed.

Results

Pre-program Surveys

Eight students participated in the voluntary pre-program evaluation, which consisted of a survey distributed electronically prior to the commencement of the on-site phase of the program. As part of this survey, students were specifically asked to comment on their understanding of the environment in social work with one question related specifically to the environment: “In social work theory we often talk about ‘people in their environment’. What is your understanding of the concept of the ‘environment’?”

All eight responses reflected conventional constructions in that participants referred to the socio-cultural context of people’s lives. Some participants specifically referred to theoretical concepts such as the micro, meso and macro elements of social work practice, and to structural factors of culture and politics. There was one exception to these responses with one participant referring to the “physical” nature of the environment. However, this participant then continued to describe the family, work, and community socio-cultural elements of society. The following response reflects the ideas of most students:

Environment can be expressed in many forms. Micro-is the individual’s personal environment, their home, family, and history. Meso is their friends, neighbourhood and community, and macro is government organisations, social policy and legislation. These are all environment [aspects] that surround us and affect our everyday living, and must be considered at all times.
Post-program Surveys

Nine students participated in the post-program evaluation, which was distributed in hard copy on the return journey to Australia and electronically distributed within a week of return. All post-program surveys were completed within two weeks of returning to Australia. As part of the post-program survey, students were asked to rate and comment on whether their understanding of the environment in social work had been expanded as a direct consequence of their study experience in India. A seven-point scale question was used to indicate the extent to which students assessed their development in understanding with one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree. This question was followed by the opportunity to comment using descriptive language.

As part of the post-program evaluation, one question related specifically to the environment: “In social work theory we often talk about ‘people in their environment’. As a result of my experiences in India, my understanding of the concept of ‘environment’ has been expanded.” Participants were then required to rate the degree of their expanded understanding of environment on a scale of one to seven with one being strongly disagree and seven being strongly agree, and then to provide an optional comment.

Out of nine responses five participants rated the degree of their expanded understanding of the environment at the highest score of seven; three participants rated the degree of their expanded understanding of the environment at the second highest score of number six; and one participant rated a score of number three. The latter participant commented that she already has a strong affiliation with environmental issues, which would explain the relatively low score in comparison to the other students.

Participants generally referred to an expanded view of the environment as involving consideration of the physical characteristics of their surroundings. Reference to water, amenities, pollution, food, and poverty were described as relating to the environment. One student wrote the following comment:
Definitely. In the village, the environment included the village and surrounds. The physical environment of the land was also an influence. In one village, the government had decreed the land arid and had designated it industrial. The village was at threat. Water development changed the landscape to lush agricultural land and it was redesignated and saved.

**Reflective Workshop**

Ten students participated in the reflective workshop on the environment, which took place on-site in the rural village of Malavli, India. The workshop went for one hour, during which students were organised into three small groups, and following the critical reflection format (Fook & Gardner 2007), they discussed: 1) Concrete experiences or incidents that relate to the environment; 2) The impact these experiences have had on understanding the ‘environment’ in social work; and 3) The impact this understanding has had on their view of social work’s role within environmental practice. At the conclusion of the workshop notes from co-researchers and workshop groups were submitted to the facilitator in de-identified form and safely stored for later analysis.

**Workshop Themes**

**Not Just a Socio-Cultural Environment.** In general, participants referred to varying natural and physical characteristics of their surroundings and related these characteristics to the environment. There were fourteen participant responses across the three workshop groups that described observable ‘physical’ characteristics of the environment in India. These characteristics included the visibility of pollution, rubbish in the streets, open sewerage, dilapidated housing, diesel fumes, water quality, dogs that appeared to be diseased living close to dwellings, and destruction of forests. Participants considered these physical characteristics as being “tangible”. Participants also expressed the nature of these characteristics as being constant. In the discussion concluding the workshop, Anna stated, “[With regard to the environment] there is no out of sight out of mind here [like in Australia]”.

Participants identified a link between these ‘physical’ characteristics and health outcomes for people in India. In particular, one workshop group expressed concern for
the well-being of children living in these environmental conditions, for example children playing in polluted river systems. Another workshop group referred to health issues such as high mortality rates and a medical system that may not adequately support people living in extreme poverty. Several safety issues were also identified by these two workshop groups, such as slum dwellings located on main motorways with small children occupying those dwellings.

Participants in the workshop groups referred to the complexity of these ‘physical’ environmental conditions. For example, participants expressed concern for the immense number of plastic bottles on roadsides and in the rivers, and the amount of waste this creates, yet recognised that the use of bottled water creates employment, and provides safe drinking water. These participants stated that it is important to view issues within a larger context, rather than in isolation. For example, one student summed this up by saying, “There are no quick fixes.”

Participants also referred to the lack of utilities and services available for some people in India such as clean, functioning toilets and sewerage systems, electricity, and clean drinking water, which are often taken for granted by most people in Australia. One student stated the following:

The thing that stood out to me in India was the comfort factor, that is, people living with so little comfort. People living all their life in a tent with no access to toilets, or even some ground to grow vegetables.

During the program, participants experienced inconsistent electricity, warm and humid temperatures with no air conditioning, and slept on mattresses on the floor.

**Global Dimensions of the Environment.** Six responses indicated an understanding of how social and environmental problems are interconnected between different countries. These responses also suggest an understanding of the imbalance of power between Western and non-Western countries. Two workshop groups wrote the following, “How can development not be about capitalism?” and “[It is] now a global world – this is the reality”. In the whole group discussion concluding the workshop, some participants discussed the contradictions of capitalism, and the dominance of the Western world in exacerbating environmental degradation in developing countries.
One student stated the following, “Is it necessary to overcome poverty because we’ve created it?”

As part of the reflective workshop, participants were asked to consider the role of social work in addressing environmental issues. Nine responses were recorded across the three workshop groups. Seven of these responses related to a grass roots approach, and included reference to terms such as “ownership”, “self-determination”, and “people are expert of their own lives”. One response referred to the need for a collective approach, rather than individualistic and another response gave a general statement confirming the need for a social work role in global environmental issues.

Participants also referred to Australian history and the oppression of Indigenous Australians as a result of European settlement. One student stated the following:

What gives us the right to come here and Westernise these people….and at what cost?...just like we’ve done to Australian Indigenous people. I’m not saying we should do nothing...but at what cost?

Several other participants also shared this concern and highlighted the potential for EuroWestern social work to become oppressive in their efforts to undertake environmental practice in non-Western countries.

**Collectivism versus Individualism.** From the three workshop groups, seven responses referred to the collective nature of some aspects of Indian culture. Participants were impressed by their observations of the communal nature of relationships in some villages, and contrasted this with Australian culture that emphasises the individual.

Throughout the program, some participants visited villages and observed examples of groups of people working together for the common good of the community. For example, participants were exposed to community groups of women who contributed money to ‘community’ funds for use when children (not necessarily their own) became sick or for the provision of community needs. Participants identified the collective nature of Indian culture as a major deficit in Australian culture. One workshop group wrote the following response:
We have such a westernised view and what culture do we really have in Australia? Our human resources are better but we do not seem to have a really trusting community.

One workshop group applied the concept of collectivism directly to environmental issues. For example, participants in this group identified the significance of grass-roots approaches. Participants made specific mention of community development approaches that are led by people in the community to facilitate sustainability, ownership, and control of activities. This group of participants highlighted the inter-relationship between the environment and the collective nature of a community with the following response, “Environment as a real community is related to the concept of person-in-environment. Community is more than the individual.”

Participants recorded three responses that related the concept of collectivism to Australian social work by identifying that social work practice is primarily individual-based. In general, these participants believed that Euro-Western culture had influenced social work knowledge and created an individual focus on practice. One workshop group expressed their belief that outcomes of Australian social work interventions are not planned or experienced by a ‘collective’ or community. Two workshop groups wrote the following responses, “Outcomes of Western social work interventions are not usually spread through the community,” and “[A] collective focus is what’s missing in our social work”.

**Discussion**

Research outcomes indicate that participation in the Study Abroad Program expanded students’ perspective of the environment in social work. Students who participated in the program were generally confronted with degraded physical and natural environmental conditions in the rural village of Malavli. As a consequence students were challenged to an extent by contrasting standards of poverty, environmental practices, and cultural differences on a scale, which they would not have normally been exposed to so readily in Australia. This served to explicitly expose the interconnectedness of people with their ‘natural’ environment and the global
dimensions of environmental degradation. Whilst the program was located in a relatively impoverished rural area, India is a diverse country with varying contexts and much diversity. In addition, within a culturally sensitive framework, there is recognition that diverse cultures and locations have different systems and values about the environment and varying means to address environmental issues.

The outcomes of the study suggest that a valuable educative experience occurred for students that challenged the conventional socio-cultural meaning of the environment to include consideration of the natural and physical environment. Findings indicate that international social work activities, such as the development of relationships with members of the host community, participation in some aspects of local culture, and active involvement in welfare programs, also expanded student understanding of the global nature of environmental degradation. Exposure to collective aspects of Indian culture appeared to be a valuable learning experience for participants in this study. The notion of groups of people working together for the common good, rather than competing against each other was noted by participants to be in direct contrast to conventional Australian culture, and to Australian social work.

However, the use of a study abroad program to develop student learning risks perpetuating Euro-Western colonial and imperial histories that serve to oppress marginalised groups in developing countries. The imposition of Euro-Western ideology, privilege, and power are key criticisms of study abroad programs (Heron, 2006; Nuttman-Shwartz & Berger, 2011; Polack, 2004; Wehbi, 2009). Social work students undertaking study abroad programs can be viewed as ‘tourists’ who undertake relatively shallow observations and conclusions about unfamiliar cultures through a Euro-Western lens. Similarly, social research is criticised for being dominated by Western modes of thinking, rather than providing a process of ‘decolonisation’ that enables Indigenous people to communicate from meaningful and relevant cultural frames of reference (Chilisa, 2012, p. 13).

In addition to this, the dominant form of Western social work is a profession born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, for example by growing alongside nationalist welfare states that support capitalist endeavours. The idea of working with marginalised groups in developing countries whose relative poverty is significantly
caused by industrialist and capitalist endeavours is contradictory and unjust (Gray, 2005; Mohan, 2008). These issues raise concern for the viability of study abroad programs within the social work curriculum. Further to this, one could argue that the industrialist and capitalist roots of social work has caused an estranged attitude in social work practice towards the natural environment. This has resulted in the inherent assumption that humans govern the natural world, rather than being interdependent with the natural world (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Bell, 2013; Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010). This critical professional analysis challenges Euro-western social work to examine its role in contributing to global and environmental problems caused by a co-dependence that exists with industrial capitalism.

Nevertheless, literature on social work education identifies several advantages of study abroad programs, including: developed understanding of international social work (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Cox & Pawar, 2006); the development of professional identity (Moorhead, Boetto, & Bell, 2013); increased cross cultural sensitivity and competence (Gilin & Young, 2009; Pawar, Hanna, & Sheridan, 2004); critical thinking, leadership and networking (Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix, & Macdonald, 2012); and a personal and political awareness of inequalities (Larson & Allen, 2006). Whilst the length and location of these and other study abroad programs vary considerably, they nonetheless indicate student learning in a number of areas when a critical and long-term approach is taken to learning.

To address some of the shortcomings of study abroad programs, conscious efforts were made by the academic facilitators to develop a program based on principles that are culturally sensitive and which develop student awareness about not only their own inherent assumptions about human behaviour, but also to appreciate the worldview of another culture. In this study, students were showing awareness of the presence of their Euro-Western lens by reproducing their experiences through guided reflection. Extensive pre-program preparation involving ongoing on-line meetings, forums, and reading of relevant literature also occurred. Whilst in India, academic facilitators conducted both formal and informal critical reflective sessions based on Fook and Gardner’s (2007) critical incident technique with students individually and in groups about incidents, experiences, and thoughts and feelings. Challenging students’ awareness of one’s own assumptions, values, and biases was
central to this process, as well as recognition by the academics of their own necessity to continually undertake this process.

In addition to this, academics and students have endeavoured to develop ongoing relationships with welfare services, professionals, and members of the host community, including the development of social justice and environmental projects to ameliorate some disadvantage in the village of Malavli. For example, the 2011 program was able to present social justice funding grants to two welfare services in India as a result of students’ initiative from the previous 2010 program. Strategies by CSU academics were also implemented for the following 2012 Study Abroad Program to provide a carbon neutral program, and an on-line learning tool for further educational opportunities in ‘green social work’. All these strategies and techniques fall alongside a social work curriculum at the university, which encompass a layered approach to developing culturally competent social work practitioners (Mlcek, 2013).

Nevertheless, the question remains, is this enough? In the absence of opinions from Indigenous voices and local Indian community members in connection with the program, it is impossible to know whether the positive impacts of the program are mutual and whether the benefits of student learning are reciprocated in some positive way to people in the host community. The inclusion of Indigenous voices in evaluating the program’s benefits pose additional challenges regarding the risk of traditional research approaches that perpetuate power differences. However, unless these avenues are explored for the CSU Study Abroad Program, the Euro-Western lens remains the dominant force for developing the knowledge gained.

Conclusion

This research suggests that participation in a two week Study Abroad Program to India provided a valuable educative experience for students’ developmental learning about the environment. Experiential learning, involving the development of relationships with the host community, people and culture, direct observations of degraded physical and environmental conditions, and involvement in organisational programs, expanded student understanding about the inextricable link between people and the natural environment. Although it might not be possible or even favourable for every social
work student to participate in a study abroad program, the results of this research suggest that an international experience might be one method of providing the impetus for change to social work students’ understanding of the environment.

The social implications of global warming are increasingly drawing attention to the relevance of the natural environment to social work practice. Fundamental to adopting a more holistic environmental focus in practice is an expanded curriculum content in social work education that considers the relationship between people and their natural environment. This broadens the conventional Western view of the environment, which in the past has almost exclusively emphasised a socio-cultural perspective. Further to this, a global perspective of social work education is required to understand the interconnectedness of environmental problems between different countries, in particular the negative effect that industrialist capitalist behaviour has on the environment. Finally, it is critical that social work academics developing international programs for students learning make a conscious effort to address the shortcomings and potential injustices of such a program through specific strategies and techniques.

**References**


Abstract

This article explores the impact of an online programme developed to educate Australian social work students about environmental sustainability. Drawing on Hawkins’ definition of global citizenship, online workshop activities are used to develop students’ knowledge, concern and action about environmental degradation in a global context. A qualitative approach is used to gauge the value of the programme, and outcomes indicate benefits to student learning about social justice issues, particularly in relation to gender, carbon emissions and global impacts. Implications for social work education are discussed, and a framework for future curriculum development is presented.

Keywords: Environment, global citizenship, social work education, sustainability

Introduction

The release of the latest International Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2014) report provides convincing evidence that, first, consequences of climate change are unfolding at rapid rates and, second, that the major factor in these climatic changes has been human influence since the mid-20th century concomitant with the advancement of the industrial revolution. Consequently, governments, environmental scientists, environmental activists and discipline-based groups are organising themselves to respond to this developing ecological crisis. The question, then, is what can the profession of social work do to contribute to the creation of an ecologically sustainable world? This article explores the role of social work education as a vehicle for preparing Australian social work students to becoming informed and active global
citizens with regard to environmental sustainability. An evaluation investigates the impact of a pilot education programme on student learning, and outcomes of the evaluation are used as an evidence-base for consideration of a framework for further curriculum development in relation to global environmental sustainability.

**Literature review**

Climate change affects us all, but the world’s poorest, least-advantaged citizens experience cumulative, disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on health and welfare (Bell, 2013; Dominelli, 2010, 2012; Kemp, 2011; World Health Organization (WHO), 2005). These groups are the main focus for social work, the profession whose global organisation strives for social justice, human rights and social development (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2014). In accordance with the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development – Commitment to Action 2012–2016* (IFSW et al., 2012), the disproportionate impacts of climate change on the most vulnerable people in the world constitutes a major social justice issue for social work scholars, practitioners and educators.

As a result, there is increasing urgency for social workers to participate in both proactive and reactive capacities as global citizens to redress adverse impacts on vulnerable groups. While social work literature relating to the natural environment began in the early 1970s by a few social work authors (Germain, 1973; Grinnell, 1973), the term ‘environment’ has conventionally referred to the socio-cultural environment (McKinnon, 2008). Contemporary authors are now calling for recognition of the natural environment as integral to social work’s identity and for a collaborative response to the ecological crisis, particularly anthropogenic climate change (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012; Kemp, 2011). Williams and Tedeschi (2013) identify a need for ongoing development of social work knowledge on issues such as climate change, food, water, over-consumption and social justice impacts on the world’s poorest people.

Some progress towards articulating the profession’s relationship with the natural environment has recently been made in national codes of ethics, such as those of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2012) and Australian Association of
Social Workers (AASW, 2010). For example, the BASW (2012) code of ethics states that ‘social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community, societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognize all aspects of a person’s life’ (p. 8, Section 2.1). The AASW mentions the environment 10 times, with 5 of these explicitly relating to the natural environment (AASW, 2010). For example, ‘Social workers will advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society’ (AASW, 2010: 20, Section 5.1.3, clause m).

It follows then that social work education should directly address the interrelationship between human beings and the natural environment. This is already recognised in some national education and accreditation standards, such as the *Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS)*, which state that ‘Australian entry-level professional social work education recognises that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and physical environments’ (AASW, 2012: 5, Section 2). However, the term ‘physical’ is not defined, and the pragmatics of how this occurs systematically across university curricula is uncertain. According to Jones’ (2013) content analysis of online curricula from 27 Australian social work courses, there is little evidence of the inclusion of the natural environment or sustainability in curriculum content apart from four universities offering a subject with specific reference to environmental sustainability. This indicates a need for a systematic approach to the integration of the natural environment and related sustainability issues into Australian social work education.

The integration of the natural environment into social work education is arguably still in the development phase, with some social work authors offering insight into the need for theoretical transformations to take place. This includes recognition of social work’s modernist roots and critique of how this has caused an estrangement from the natural environment and from core theory in dominant forms of Western social work (Coates, 2005). Alternative conceptual frameworks have been suggested, including the use of biophilia (Besthorn and Saleeby, 2003; Lysack, 2010), deep ecology (Besthorn, 2012), ecofeminism (Besthorn and McMillen, 2002; Norton, 2012) and postconventional social work theory (Bell, 2012). Shaw (2013) surveyed 373 social workers in the United States and found strong support among participants for social work's role in environmental sustainability.
work to play an increased role in sustainability and social policy. In particular, these social workers wanted more curriculum content on the natural environment, especially in relation to the impacts of environmental degradation and access to safe drinking water for the world’s poorest people.

The pilot project

The authors of this article are part of a group of social work academics employed at Charles Sturt University who share concern about the lack of opportunity for social work students to make meaningful connections between the natural environment and the role of social work in understanding and responding to environmental degradation within a global context. We are also involved in facilitating international field programmes for social work students at Charles Sturt University, and this has also raised concerns about how to avoid perpetuating Euro-Western colonial and imperial values related to modernist thinking, for example in relation to environmental degradation, poverty and gender inequality. And while there is some content relating to sustainability and climate change, this is limited in an already over-crowded curriculum. Examples of existing subject material relating to sustainability and climate change at the university include recent updates to existing subjects and the use of case studies about the effects of severe, adverse climatic events, such as drought and floods, on rural communities. While this approach to incorporating sustainability in the social work curriculum was considered better than nothing, it is ad hoc and does little to change fundamental thinking about the relationship between social justice and environmental issues. A much more foundational approach – even a single subject or programme encapsulating sustainability and ecological social work – was regarded by the academics as one way of addressing the identified gap. In efforts to proactively address these concerns, we sought to develop a voluntary and cost-free online programme for interested students to explore issues of environmental sustainability and the ecological crisis as being central to social work.

Jones (2013) describes three approaches to developing a more ecologically informed curriculum, including the ‘bolt-on approach’, ‘embedded’ approach and ‘transformative’ approach (pp. 217–20). The bolt-on approach focuses on adding content relating to ecological sustainability to the existing curriculum, and the
embedded approach aims to permeate ecological sustainability throughout the existing curriculum. Finally, the transformative approach seeks to change the fundamental orientation of social work education to reflect a holistic understanding of the place of humans in the natural world. Each approach represents a higher order of integration, and while all approaches represent worthy modifications, the transformative approach indicates a substantial shift in developing deep understandings of the natural world. The key elements Jones describes in relation to a transformative approach include ecoliteracy, Indigenous perspectives, spirituality and a critical theoretical approach. Although the educational approach the authors subscribed for the pilot programme considered in this research was a ‘bolt-on’ approach according to Jones’ classification, it was nevertheless considered a positive, initial step towards recognising the significance of environmental sustainability and climate change in social work education at the university. In the short term, as a pilot programme, it provides immediacy in addressing an identified gap in course content without having to go through protracted university processes for substantial changes to subject content. In the longer term, outcomes from the pilot programme provide an evidence-base for further curriculum development relating to global environmental sustainability in social work at the university.

Description of the project

The Ecological Social Work Programme was developed as a cost-free, optional, online programme for both distance education and on-campus students within the university’s existing online subject delivery system and with aid from a small university grant. Online delivery provides a platform for equitable delivery of curriculum content to geographically dispersed students and is cost-effective from the university’s point of view as well as from student-participants’ perspectives (Jones, 2010a). Hawkins’ (2009) definition of global citizenship was used to frame the workshop content as it identifies the ‘moral and ethical responsibility toward human rights, economic fairness, social justice and environmental sustainability … [and encourages] social work students to make a professional commitment to human rights literacy (knowledge), empathy (concern) and responsibility (action)’ (p. 116). The programme was time-limited and ran for 6 weeks in 2012.
Drawing on De Freitas and Neumann’s (2007) pedagogical approach to e-learning, the programme incorporates aspects of the Exploratory Learning Model (ELM), which includes five stages: experience, exploration, reflection, forming abstract concepts and testing of ideas. This means that a combination of virtual experiences, exploration exercises, critical reflection and group interaction activities was included in the programme in a non-linear fashion to maximise student learning. The ELM updates and expands on Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning by extending the experiences to include e-learning and virtual experiences. In addition, a reflective approach to practice was considered in the development of the programme, including Fook and Gardner’s (2007: 44) reflective practice model. This model broadly consists of two main stages: the first involves ‘unsettling’ fundamental assumptions through concrete experience, and the second involves the development of new awareness and subsequent practice changes. Each online workshop followed the following format.

- **Introduction of the workshop theme** – including definitions, key statistics and dot-points to provide a ‘snapshot’ of the theme;

- **Interactive learning activity or stimulus** – based on the workshop theme (i.e. an online quiz, YouTube clip, images or an article to read);

- **Asynchronous student wiki discussion and reflection** – in response to questions associated with the key theme to provide students with an opportunity for dialogue and exchange of information. The wiki also provided textual data to explore the impact of the programme, as described later.

The programme covered six workshop themes, and the content of each is now discussed. The *global warming* workshop provided an overview of the major impacts of global warming on human health and well-being, with an emphasis on health issues. The learning activity consisted of a quiz to test knowledge of global warming and a quiz on drinking water.

As part of the *global citizenship* workshop activity, participants were given Hawkins’ (2009) definition of global citizenship. This definition was chosen because it directly links global citizenship to social work identity and purpose. The learning activity was based on two images: one of an Indian woman cooking on a small, open
fire on the floor of a basic, unadorned dwelling and the other of a Western ‘nuclear family’ cooking in a modern, fitted kitchen. Students were asked which picture they relate to the most and then challenged to consider the local and global impacts of a privileged consumerist lifestyle.

The *gender, social justice and human rights* workshop highlighted gender as a major factor in conceptualising human rights, social justice and environmental social work issues. Participants were presented with a range of statistics providing evidence of the global disadvantage experienced by women within a human rights framework (see Reichert, 2006). Two further activities were suggested: a reading on women and climate change plus two short ‘YouTube’ videos depicting how the empowerment of women and girls is central to promoting human rights, social justice and equity.

The *carbon footprints* workshop was designed to develop awareness about the causes of greenhouse gas emissions, for example, through transport, production and consumption of food, manufactured goods and services. In addition to this, participants were provided the opportunity to explore their own individual carbon footprints using an online carbon calculator.

Participants in the *glocalisation* workshop were introduced to the term ‘glocalisation’ (Hong and Song, 2010: 656) and encouraged to consider the global impact of local activities. Community capacity was also explored, and the Institute for Sustainable Communities (ISC, 2014) website was accessed as an online tool to explore the attributes of a sustainable community.

The final workshop – *ecological social work* – focused on the social work profession’s responsibility in making connections between the natural environment and human well-being within the context of a continued commitment to human rights and social justice.

**Methods used to explore the impact of the programme**

The aim of this research was to explore the role of social work education as a vehicle for preparing Australian social work students to becoming informed and active global citizens with regard to environmental sustainability. An evaluation investigates the impact of the programme on student learning, and outcomes of the evaluation are
used as an evidence-base for consideration of a framework for further curriculum development in relation to environmental sustainability.

Data collection and analysis

The qualitative data consist of textual data from the participants’ online wiki posts in response to each of the six workshop themes. At the end of the programme, the research assistant downloaded, de-identified and collated the wiki discussion data into text documents before returning the data to the research team for analysis. The data were then thematically analysed through open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Ezzy, 2002). The data were collated using the workshop theme as the base code, and then each wiki question became a constructed code for initial data organisation. Further analytic, thematic coding within each constructed code was then completed by organising central themes relevant to the purposes of the project. For example, as a workshop theme, ‘carbon footprints’ represented a base code and the wiki posts were organised into their respective constructed codes. From this, themes emerged from the data, such as the ‘barriers’ students referred to as restricting them from reducing their individual carbon footprints. Quotations from the data are used to highlight participants’ voices and are described and discussed in the ‘Findings’ section of this article.

Recruitment

The programme was promoted via an online announcement on social work subject sites within the online study environment. Potential participants with an existing interest in environmental matters, as well as students with a curiosity to learn more about environmental issues in social work, were encouraged to participate in the programme. Students who had participated in the social work study abroad programmes were particularly encouraged to participate as a way to highlight the global context of social work as well as the carbon footprint created by international travel. Students were informed of the optional nature of participation and provided with a link to the project’s research assistant for further information. Those who responded to the invitation to participate were then given a more detailed information sheet about the project and the consent form. The research assistant
retained copies of all completed consent forms. A total of 31 students undertaking a qualifying degree in social work volunteered to participate in the programme. Consistent with our gendered student cohort, 30 out of 31 participants were female.

**Ethical considerations**

Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate university ethics committee. Particular ethical considerations included the voluntary nature of participation, the non-assessable nature of participation and the requirement of anonymity for students. An information sheet was provided to each potential participant as they responded online to the research assistant to express interest in participating in the project. The information sheet emphasised the voluntary nature of participation and reinforced that participation or non-participation in the programme did not affect grading in other subjects or overall course progression. Students were also informed that participation involved online ‘wiki’ discussions and activities and that wiki posts would be de-identified at the end of the workshop programme and used as research data. It was specified that the data would be used to explore student attitudes to environmental issues and to assess the usefulness of online material to enhance student engagement in relation to environmental sustainability. The online programme site was not managed by academic staff; a non-faculty research assistant was appointed for this purpose to maximise participant anonymity.

**Limitations**

This is an exploratory study involving a small number of participants, and as such, there is no claim made as to the representativeness or generalisability of the findings. The study aims instead to provide potentially indicative, exploratory research on an under-researched topic and to make a valuable contribution to developing teaching in social work.

A possible limitation of the study was the timing of the programme, which may have impacted the capacity of students to participate. The programme commenced towards the end of the academic calendar when other study commitments could have been prohibitive for some students. In order to alleviate these pressures, the programme was designed to be flexible, self-paced and extending beyond the end of
semester. The programme was also optional and represented additional workload for students; it offered no reward or recognition (e.g. a grade) for student participation and effort. Given this, it is likely that only students with an existing interest in sustainability issues self-selected to participate. Thus, it is likely the programme did not capture students with a low awareness or concern about environmental sustainability.

**Findings**

The wiki data from each workshop theme are now described and discussed with reference to the literature review.

**Global warming**

Ten participants posted comments in response to this workshop activity, with six indicating they already had a sound knowledge of global warming but had learned a lot more about water than they had previously known. In particular, participants found the material on the importance of access to safe drinking water, effective sanitation, water-borne diseases and ground-water depletion to be informative. Nine comments were posted on what had surprised them (if anything) about the workshop activity, with four indicating ‘surprise’, ‘amazement’ and ‘shock’ at the level of ‘unnecessary consumption’ of bottled water in countries where households have reliable access to safe tap water, for example: ‘I was surprised and saddened by the numbers of people who do not have access to the water that I take for granted’. One participant also indicated surprise at the amount of water it takes to produce one bottle of water. One other participant thought that the number of people without access to safe drinking water would be higher ‘given levels of poverty’.

Seven comments were posted in response to the question ‘do you think there are any gender issues relating to global warming?’ All seven indicated there are gender issues, with five referring to a need for more information in order to better understand gender issues. One participant said that ecofeminist literature had helped to develop knowledge of the gendered impacts. One other participant thought that the nature of one’s employment might impact gendered experiences of global warming, stating, for example, that in industrialised countries men might be hardest
hit by drought as farmers are ‘predominantly men’, while in developing countries, women do most agricultural work and might be the hardest hit. One student stated that because women mostly collect household water ‘in poverty-stricken countries’, women would be most affected by lack of access to safe water.

Global citizenship

Participants were asked to consider the local and global implications of two ‘lifestyle’ images (an Indian woman cooking over a fire and a family in a typically ‘Western’ kitchen) and specifically to respond to the wiki question, ‘Which lifestyle depicted in the images is most likely to be more sustainable and why?’ Nine comments were posted, with five stating that the Indian image was likely to be the most sustainable lifestyle. These comments generally related to the simplicity of the image – ‘a simple meal being prepared in simple conditions with no hint of any global interference’, including the lack of electrical appliances, other consumerist goods and equipment. One participant also commented on the implied small-scale sustainability of the lone Indian woman cooking and of her taking only what she needs to survive, with minimal waste. The second, contrasting image was described in the following terms: ‘The second image shows many appliances and goods which would not likely have been produced locally so that labour, transport and exploitation have probably all come into play in setting this ‘happy’ scene’.

The other four comments relating to this wiki question were much more equivocal and contained reflections on the ‘complexity’ of whether individual subsistence lifestyles are as efficient as they appear in terms of resource use. One participant commented on the use of the indoor open fire and wondered about air quality and the source of the wood used to fuel the fire. This participant linked the wood-burning fire to deforestation, noting that while wood-burning fires for cooking may not be the major reason for deforestation, they still contribute to the overall loss of old-growth forests. Another participant described the second image as a representation of how modern, Westernised lifestyles are fundamentally disconnected from the environment. This participant also felt that the first image represented a more ecologically just approach to satisfying her own needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. One
participant commented on how the lone Indian woman’s energy might be devoted to survival, while the Western family’s relative material affluence might allow them the ‘luxury of thinking beyond their immediate community’. Participants were also asked, ‘What actions might be undertaken by a responsible global citizen to contribute to fairness?’ Five comments were posted, offering macro level suggestions, plus micro-level, practical actions. For example, macro level actions included awareness of and educating others about global poverty, making sustainable lifestyle choices, buying ‘fair trade goods’ and donating to international aid organisations.

**Gender, human rights, social justice and global warming**

After viewing the video material and reading the ‘snapshot’ facts, participants were presented with three wiki questions: Why might ‘girls be the answer’? What about males? What gender, human rights and social justice issues affect Australians? Eight comments were posted on girls being ‘the answer’, with all participants commenting on the global/collective impacts of empowerment for women and with one participant noting that ‘without equity in decision-making, the decisions will always favour those who make them’. Some participants directly linked the initial textual information provided in this workshop activity to the ideas raised in the videos:

*The clips show that if society invests in the future of women, their lives will change for the better … Closing the gaps between men and women will be a long task to complete however but when reached it will hopefully end the cycle of poverty and disadvantage for women.*

*Taking on the figures … at the start of this module, it becomes evident that women are directly affected by climate change though its effects on work, poverty, farming and the cycles of these interactions … Intercepting the cycle of poverty … has to have a positive impact on generations … I liked this campaign, I found it empowering for girls and it made change seem achievable.*

All eight comments in response to the question about males related to the existence of male power and privilege; one participant commented on males being potential ‘facilitators of change’. One participant commented on the global citizenship responsibilities of educated, Western women: ‘I feel it’s our obligation as educated
women to ensure that women are given equal opportunities and life chances as men and [it is] our responsibility to assist women abroad’. Seven comments were posted in response to ‘What gender, human rights and social justice issues affect Australians?’ All comments identified discrimination against immigrants, refugees and asylum-seekers as a ‘major’ issue. Likewise, gender discrimination against women was identified by all and included workplace discrimination (especially in relation to child-rearing), unequal pay and women’s underrepresentation in leadership roles in politics and business. Six participants identified discrimination against Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as an ongoing issue in Australia. Other issues identified included discrimination against people with disabilities, same-sex couples, rural and remote people, and homeless people (one comment each). The following observation encapsulates the comments overall:

There is still gender inequality within the workplace and politics, although this is changing ... In terms of social justice and human rights, multiple groups come to mind. Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders have poor statistics in regards to health, education, equality, and detainment. Refugees and people from diverse cultures are also often neglected in terms of social justice and discrimination in our society. This is perpetuated by law and mainstream values and norms.

Carbon footprint

A total of 11 participants engaged in the wiki discussion and were asked the following questions: Could you reduce your carbon footprint? What are the practical steps you could take? Could you reduce your energy consumption? Could you offset your car emissions or reduce them? Could you ride a push-bike? Could you reduce your house size to be more energy efficient? Could you increase your tree planting or support sustainable developments and sustainable design?

Participants identified various strategies for reducing their own carbon footprints, including buying locally grown produce, growing your own vegetables, reducing animal product consumption, installation of solar panels, reducing food wastage, energy-efficient means of cooling, using cars less and accessing public transport, planting trees and various other strategies such as reducing plastic bags and
wrappings, house modifications, recycling, accessing green energy sources, composting and keeping chickens. Participants also identified strategies that could reduce their car emissions, including car-pooling; planting trees; walking, riding or using the train service; and reducing multiple trips into town. Four participants also agreed they could ride their push-bikes more. The two participants who agreed they could downsize their living arrangements referred to their children having left home to live independently.

Five participants highlighted a range of personal reasons as to why it would not be possible to reduce car emissions, including having no access to public transport in their community, multiple children making it difficult to use public transport and the workplace being too far away to ride a bike. Reasons for not being able to reduce house size included having a small apartment, having a large family, already living in a shared arrangement and a scarcity of rental properties that does not enable a choice in the size of the house. Time and money in relation to increased tree planting were also identified by some as constraining tree planting opportunities.

‘Glocalisation’

Four participants responded to five questions on the wiki: In what ways are community capacity building and global outcomes linked? The ISC article says that climate change is one of the major challenges to people’s quality of life – do you agree or disagree with this, and why? How do you think making the most of local economic opportunities could lead to a more global, positive effect? Can you think of some examples? What could you do individually, at a local level, which might contribute to a positive, broader outcome? Share some ideas about individual, organisation, or community activities and behaviours which can contribute to a more positive outcome.

All four participants agreed that climate change is one of the major challenges to people’s quality of life, and made references to a variety of issues such as poverty, disease, crop failure, widespread hunger and wars as people fight for scarce resources. Three participants also strongly identified an association between community capacity and global outcomes. Two of these participants specifically referred to the capability
of communities to address structural inequalities that create and sustain global disadvantage, such as capitalism.

Participants identified a range of possible local activities that could provide economic opportunities, including the development of Indigenous tourism initiatives that values Aboriginal people as our ‘first’ people as well as provides an economic benefit. Other examples included green energy, buying and selling of local and seasonal foods, sustainable agricultural practices and building capacity in marginalised farming areas, as well as research into sustainable pastures, which might contribute to solutions in the global south.

Participants identified a range of ideas about the types of individual, organisational or community activities that could contribute to a more positive global outcome. Responses by participants included the following in relation to the individual: becoming informed about sustainability issues, making an informed decision not to buy products that are manufactured under exploitative conditions (n = 1), reducing water and energy use, and planting trees. At the organisational level, participants identified two initiatives, which involved the monitoring of and reduction in organisational energy consumption and organisational support for a community building project or child sponsorship. At the community level, participants referred to community gardens, monitoring of pollution, healthy living activities and collaboration of community members through community meetings and newsletters.

Environmental social work

Four participants responded to three questions on the wiki relating to professional, practice and personal issues: ‘At the professional level, what obligations do social workers have towards global citizenship and sustainability?’ ‘At the practice level, what are the most significant sustainability issues social workers should be aware of in their everyday work?’ ‘At a personal level, what changes might you make (or have you made) to your everyday life?’

Three participants identified environmental education as a professional obligation, including the responsibility to develop current theoretical knowledge, to remain informed about local and global issues, as well as the need to share and
educate other people about environmental issues. Two participants related to professional ethical obligations of social justice and the need to support like-minded charity organisations with the same aims.

At the practice level, participants made several suggestions each about the significant issues social workers should be aware of, including making modifications to the workplace such as recycling, reducing paper usage and energy consumption. Participants also referred to developing knowledge about local and global issues, having an awareness of initiatives that might improve the lives of community members, educating clients about sustainability and global activism. In particular, one participant framed his or her response by referring to the micro-, meso- and macro levels of practice, including advocacy, intervention, community development, education, research and policy making.

In relation to the personal level, participants made noteworthy comments about the positive impact that participation in the online programme has had on their personal lives. The participants referred to activities they are already undertaking as well as to activities they will now pursue, for example:

Since studying green social work I have become more aware of the changes that I can make within my personal life. Employing such acts as turning off appliances at their switches when not in use, recycling more often, starting to buy more ethically produced food such as teabags, chocolate and coffee but will look into other products as well and continuing to support the charity organisation Save the Children.

Discussion and implications for social work education

Educators now have a range of communication technologies with which to engage students. Findings from this study reinforce the importance of experiential e-learning activities for maintaining student engagement throughout the programme (De Freitas and Neumann, 2007). Workshop participation varied according to levels of experiential learning, and participants engaged more actively in workshop topics that provided a visual or interactive stimulus relevant to the theme, such as an online quiz or video. Participants were less likely to contribute to workshop topics requiring large
amounts of reading. Further improvement to the programme is needed to ensure each workshop topic commences with a meaningful and attractive stimulus to engage participants at an empathic level, as a foundation to developing human rights literacy and a commitment to global citizenship (Hawkins, 2009).

Outcomes of the research indicate there was some educational benefit to student learning through participation in the pilot programme. Data suggest there was new learning for participants, for example, in relation to gender oppression, water quality and the cost of carbon emissions, as well as the global impacts of local actions in relation to environmental degradation. This suggests the programme developed knowledge and awareness for participants about the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, and the inter-related global nature of environmental degradation, highlighting these issues as of concern to social work and a call to action, reflecting Hawkins’ (2009) definition of global citizenship.

From the data, gaps in participants’ knowledge were also identified, particularly in relation to foundational issues such as social work theory, gender and Eurocentrism. For example, one participant assumed that farmers in industrialised countries are predominantly male, and therefore, men suffer most from climate change. This represents a dominant, oppressive, patriarchal construction of farming. In addition, participants posted many comments on ‘privilege’, but the focus remained on ameliorating the impacts of ‘privilege’ on the ‘underprivileged’, rather than on deconstructing the nature of privilege itself. Without increased emphasis on how privilege is maintained, we are not working effectively for social change, and risk working as agents of social control (Author, 2013b; Pease, 2010). Due to the brevity of the programme, it is unlikely that such constructions can be comprehensively critiqued and challenged; a more sustained and integrated approach is required. This emphasises the need for social work education to include critical reflection and dialogue in order to examine how social work in the context of industrial capitalism is contributing to global and environmental problems for the world’s least-advantaged citizens (Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010b). It also reinforces the importance of human rights literacy (Hawkins, 2009) as foundational in social work education for ecological justice and global citizenship.
Responses from participants also highlight the difficulties some individuals experience in adopting environmentally sustainable practices and provide insight into the barriers that impede progress towards individual change. For example, participants noted their reasons for not being able to reduce car emissions, such as a lack of access to public transport and issues of safety on roads for push-bike riding. While individual change is one aspect of sustainability, a focus on individual behaviour modification alone fails to recognise that those who consume most of the resources responsible for causing climate change are the larger industries predominantly concerned with capitalist notions of profit and economic growth (Coates, 2005; IFSW et al., 2012). It follows, then, that an educational approach needs to include a structural analysis to avoid an unreasonable focus on individuals, especially those living in disadvantaged circumstances. This critical theory approach corresponds with social work’s existing approach to education and is a key dimension of Jones’ (2013) transformative approach to an expanded ecological curriculum.

Outcomes of the pilot programme provide an evidence-base for further curriculum development in relation to environmental sustainability. As a ‘bolt-on’ approach according to Jones’ (2013) classification of curriculum alternatives, results from this research suggest that a more comprehensive integration of environmental sustainability into curricula is needed to enhance social work education. This supports Jones’ (2013) argument that a ‘transformative’ approach to developing an ecologically informed curriculum is ideal for nurturing a deeper understanding of the interdependence between people and the natural environment, including ‘eco-literacy’ (knowledge of nature’s systems) and ‘criticality’ (critical theory approach) (p. 221). In conjunction with Hawkins’ (2009) definition of global citizenship, environmental sustainability is thus located within a global context that acknowledges the disproportionate effects of climate change on the world’s poorest, least advantaged citizens. This global framework also acknowledges social work’s commitment to social justice and human rights as ethical and professional responsibilities, in relation to empathy (concern), literacy (knowledge) and responsibility (action). The following model provides a framework for curriculum content and development. This model could be used to ensure that content is woven
like a green thread throughout social work curricula and not isolated or ‘bolted-on’ (see Table 1).

Table 1. Transformative curriculum development for environmental sustainability in social work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Aspects of global citizenship (Hawkins, 2009)</th>
<th>Foundations of curriculum content</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empathy/concern</strong></td>
<td>Provide opportunities for social work students to develop awareness about environmental decline and the impact of personal behaviours within a global context (e.g. self-exploration activities, carbon footprint assessments); Facilitate meaningful and experiential learning activities with the aim of developing concern and empathy regarding global environmental issues (e.g. interactive online and classroom activities involving individual and community-based case studies, group activities); Facilitate a deep understanding of the interdependence and interconnectedness of humans with the natural environment by providing opportunities for students to reconnect with nature (e.g. nature-based activities, field placements, study abroad programmes).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge/literacy</strong></td>
<td>Nurture an understanding about ecology and the place of people within a natural world, including Indigenous knowledge; Foster a healthy critique of assumptions within core social work theory subjects, including conventional, modernist roots and inherent estrangement from the natural environment; Facilitate ongoing opportunities for critical reflection on social constructions related to environmental sustainability, including gender and privilege; Apply social work values of social justice and human rights to environmental sustainability issues, including consideration of environmental justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Action/responsibility</strong></td>
<td>Embed experiential learning opportunities throughout the social work curriculum, including research, study abroad, field education, community action and projects with an emphasis on natural environmental considerations; Facilitate interactive online and classroom activities that combine experience, exploration and critical reflection to encourage student engagement and understanding about environmental sustainability issues (e.g. audio-visual stimuli, news events, asynchronous and synchronous communication activities); Identify strategies throughout the curriculum for day-to-day practice that equip social workers for practising mindfully in an ecologically informed way.</td>
</tr>
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</table>
Climate change is already having serious effects on people across the globe, including health, emotional, gender, social and economic impacts. It is our view that social work as a collective body has the opportunity to contribute in meaningful ways, as global citizens, to environmental sustainability. Education is a vehicle to ensure social work graduates are informed about issues of environmental sustainability. Social work graduates need education for sustainable practice in order to respond to the impacts of climate change. Importantly, graduates also need proactive education so that they can contribute to protection of the environment and, ideally, also to prevent further environmental degradation into the future. This is fundamental for social work as a profession with an articulated commitment to human rights, social and environmental justice (Hawkins, 2009; IFSW et al., 2012).

Conclusion

A major challenge for social work is the comprehensive reconfiguration of the profession’s conceptual foundation, in order to transcend the limitations of our modernist foundations. Western social work’s relationship with modernism underpins the estrangement between the traditional social work domain and the natural environment. This has obscured the interconnectedness of humans and the natural environment (Alston and Besthorn, 2012; Author, 2013b), and social work education still typically tends to mirror this estrangement (Shaw, 2013). ‘Bolt-on’ content can play a role in introducing ecological content into social work curricula within a relatively short time frame. It is ideally part of a long-term strategy to embed curriculum content in order to encourage transformative learning in relation to ecological social work and global citizenship.

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Publication 3: Exploring food security in social work field education: Analysis of a food relief program

Reference details:

Abstract

This paper explores field education as a place for student learning with regard to household food insecurity for vulnerable groups in regional Australia. Through the examination of a Uniting Church faith-based food relief program, students and field educators provide an analysis of the complex relationship between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. Using a critical reflective approach, the benefits and challenges associated with faith-based food relief programs and food security are discussed at the micro, meso and macro levels of practice. The authors conclude that this field education encounter provided a positive learning experience for students in relation to developing an increased awareness of food insecurity as part of social work’s vision for human rights and social justice. Implications for social work education are considered, including the need for a more inclusive and transformative approach to curriculum design for embedding the natural environment in social work.

Keywords: Food insecurity; Social work field Education; Climate change; Faith-based; Ecological social work; Food relief

Introduction

Food insecurity

It seems strange that people living in economically advanced countries such as Australia can be experiencing hunger when it is well known that the majority of hungry people in the world, numbering about 842 million, live in the Global South (Food and Agriculture Organisation [FAO], International Fund for Agricultural Development [IFAD] & World Food Programme [WFP], 2013). Australia’s economy is one of the most
advanced in the world, having remained relatively stable during the recent 2007–08 global financial crisis according to economic growth statistics during that time. Australia has had its economic status confirmed in the latest World Economic Outlook report by the International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2014) forecasting strong Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth projections for outperforming every major advanced economy. It is estimated that Australia, with a population of just 24 million, produces enough food to feed around 60 million people (Prime Minister’s Science, Engineering & Innovation Council [PMSIEC], 2010) and yet research indicates that significant sub-populations experience household food insecurity (Anglicare Australia, 2012; UnitingCare Australia, 2013). Those most vulnerable to food insecurity in Australia include people who are economically disadvantaged, people with special needs (such as those suffering from ill health or mental health issues), people who are homeless, those who have disabilities, and people living in rural and remote communities (Centre for Public Health Nutrition, 2003). These groups are the main focus for social work, a profession that operates within a human rights and social justice framework (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2004). This professional value base suggests that social workers have a responsibility to respond to current food security issues as an ethical obligation.

This paper explores field education as a place for student learning with regard to household food insecurity for vulnerable groups in regional Australia. Through the examination of a Uniting Church faith-based food relief program, students and field educators provide an analysis of the complex relationship between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. A widely acknowledged definition of food insecurity was developed by the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO), which defines food insecurity as:

*A situation that exists when people lack secure access to sufficient amounts of safe and nutritious food for normal growth and development and an active and healthy life. It may be caused by the unavailability of food, insufficient purchasing power, inappropriate distribution or inadequate use of food at the household level. (FAO et al., 2013, p. 50)*
It is worth noting the difference between *national* food insecurity and *household* food insecurity. Food insecurity on a national scale is of particular concern to some nations in the Global South where hunger and extreme poverty are large-scale problems. Other nations, such as Australia, are food secure at the national level, but have significant sub-populations experiencing household food insecurity (Anglicare Australia, 2012; UnitingCare Australia, 2013).

Although Australia does not have a comprehensive approach to measuring national household food security, some evidence based on household incomes provides insight into food affordability. According to the Australian Council of Social Services (ACOSS, 2012), 12.8% of adults and 17.3% of all children are living below the poverty line, which is calculated as being less than 50% of the median income for a single adult ($358 per week) and for a couple with two children ($752). As income is a major indicator of food insecurity (Tarasuk, 2001), these figures give serious cause for concern. The capacity to afford nutritious food is further compromised when families are burdened with price rises associated with the impacts of climate change, such increased costs for fresh foods, fuel, electricity and water.

UnitingCare Australia (2013) conducted a national financial hardship survey with 131 individuals who accessed UnitingCare Emergency Relief and Financial Counselling services. The survey found 65% of respondents could not afford enough food, and that, in respect of regional respondents, over 90% could not afford enough food on a regular basis. In its latest 2013 report, Foodbank Australia reported a 9% increase in people receiving food relief, and that approximately 473,000 people sought food relief each month, of which 35% were children (Foodbank Australia, 2013). The report noted that a major characteristic of welfare agencies distributing Foodbank’s supplies is a reliance on volunteers to undertake the tasks associated with food relief. In the absence of comprehensive national food security data, these figures provide some evidence that food insecurity constitutes a significant issue in Australia.

The effects of anthropogenic climate change have been identified as a major risk factor to the long-term provision of food and sustainable agricultural practices around the world. It is predicted that rising temperatures and increasingly extreme weather events will cause large-scale water shortages and agricultural instability (International
Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007, 2013). Australia is no exception, with climate scientists making links between climate change and extreme weather events that have occurred throughout much of the 21st century, such as drought, floods and bushfires (Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation [CSIRO], 2014). These conditions are expected to worsen and cause severe damage to Australia’s agricultural industry. For example, the Murray Darling Basin in Australia (which produces more than 40% of Australia’s total gross value of agricultural production), is predicted to decline in annual output by 12% by 2030 and 49% by 2050 if anthropogenic climate change is not abated (Garnaut, 2008). It is expected that the Australian agricultural industry will undergo major structural changes and, as a consequence, Australian families and communities will suffer large-scale economic and social burdens.

**Social work and food insecurity**

As evidence relating to the consequences of climate change becomes more apparent, the cumulative, disproportionate impacts of environmental degradation on health and welfare of vulnerable groups are of major ethical concern to social work (Dominelli, 2012). Many contemporary authors agree that the integration of the natural environment and sustainability in social work is an ethical issue closely associated with environmental ethics and environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2012; McKinnon, 2008).

In efforts to incorporate an environmental perspective into social work, some national codes of ethics have recently recognised the natural environment as integral to social work, including the Australian and British codes of ethics (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010; British Association of Social Workers [BASW], 2012). The AASW Code of Ethics refers to the natural environment a total of five times, for example, it recognises the “protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing” and states this is an explicit principle of social justice (AASW, 2010, section 3.2, p. 13). These changes are evidenced internationally by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), in partnership with the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW) in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action (2012). This document outlines five specific commitments for
action during 2012 to 2016, including the promotion of “sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development” (2012, n.p.) aimed at protecting the natural environment. These changes provide a professionally sanctioned requirement for social workers to practise in an environmentally conscious way, not just as a peripheral or incidental issue of concern, but as a central responsibility for ethical practice. This professional recognition is consistent with worldwide consensus that the effects of climate change are posing a serious threat to the quality of human life, including a decline in food production and availability (Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2013).

From a theoretical perspective, social work traditionally has adopted an environmental position through systems and ecological perspectives. Although this emphasis has largely comprised a socio-cultural focus (McKinnon, 2008), contemporary authors are now calling for renewed vigor more explicitly incorporating the natural environment in social work theory (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012; McKinnon, 2008). The ‘person-in-environment’ perspective has had a significant influence on social work since Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model of social work practice. Person-in-environment describes the inseparability of an individual and their environment and the transactions that occur between them (Connolly & Harms, 2012): an individual is influenced by the environment around them, just as the environment is influenced by people. Early conceptions of this approach emphasised the socio-cultural context of the environment; however, there were exceptions where concern about the neglect of the physical environment was identified (e.g., Germain, 1981; Weick, 1981). This person-in-environment perspective provides insight into how social work can understand the complex nature of human-induced climate change, and provides a theoretical basis for integrating natural environment issues, such as food insecurity, into social work practice.

To date, several social work authors have identified food security as a concern for social work, particularly with regard to the impacts of climate change on marginalised groups. Authors in North America have explored various aspects of social work’s role in addressing food insecurity, including working towards change of inequitable food systems (Kaiser, 2011, 2013), analysis of government programs relating to food security (Hoefer & Curry, 2012) and the impact of fossil fuel dependence on food security (Polack, Wood, & Bradley, 2008). Elsewhere, food
security issues have related to sustainable vertical farming initiatives (Besthorn, 2013),
gender inequities associated with food security and women’s health (Phillips, 2009),
and community-based responses to the impacts of climate change on food sources
(Drolet, 2012). Riches (2011) provides a rich critique of welfare reform in nations from
the Global North, such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United Kingdom that
undermine or divert government responsibility from providing basic survival needs,
such as food, to marginalised groups. This literature reflects an emerging professional
concern for food insecurity and provides impetus for continuing the development of a
social work role in addressing food security issues.

Program description

The social work field education placement that is the focus of this article was located
at UnitingCare in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales (NSW). Wagga Wagga has a
geographical catchment area that includes approximately 100,000 people, and relies
heavily on agricultural, manufacturing, and retail industries (http://www.wagga.nsw.gov.au/).
Many surrounding rural villages, townships, and farming communities are serviced by the regional centre for health, business,
employment, education, and other consumer needs. Two social work students were
placed within the Community Development Partnerships Program at UnitingCare. This
placement provided the opportunity for students to work closely with volunteers from
the Wagga Wagga Uniting Church which coordinates a range of food and hospitality
support programs, including two school breakfast programs, a drop-in centre and a
grocery hamper and bread redistribution program that are collectively known as the
Food and Hamper Ministry. Some of these programs have been provided by the church for many years, including: the Afternoon Tea Program, which originally
commenced approximately 80 years ago; the Drop-In Centre, Bread Ministry and
School Breakfast Programs, which have operated continuously for over 15 years; and
the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program, which commenced approximately 10 years
ago.

Although the students had some involvement with all of these programs, the
Grocery Hamper and Bread Program was the main focus of activity for the social work
practicum.
This program operates as a local distribution outlet for Foodbank NSW and SecondBite Community Connect programs. Foodbank is an independent not-for-profit organisation dedicated to alleviating hunger by saving and storing excess food from food services, such as supermarkets, farms and bakeries in warehouses to be distributed to food relief agencies for dissemination to people who do not have access to available food sources. The Wagga Wagga Uniting Church Food and Hamper Ministry order, on average, 250-300 kg of dry food per week from the NSW Foodbank warehouse and distribute this as packaged 5 or 10-kg hampers. These hampers are purchased for the freight-cost-recovery fee of $1AUD per kg from the food ministry shop.

The SecondBite Community Connect Program also provides food to the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program. SecondBite Community Connect is an independent national, not-for-profit food recovery and redistribution program established in Victoria in 2008. Unlike Foodbank, SecondBite focuses specifically upon fresh produce. Its Community Connect program, in association with a national supermarket company, links charities that register with them to their local supermarket outlets to collect produce that otherwise would go to waste. Donated bread from a local bakery and fresh fruit and vegetables sourced through SecondBite is distributed free by the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program.

There is no overt evangelism associated with the grocery hamper program, and service users do not need to provide proof of identity to receive assistance. This appears to be a unique aspect of the program, certainly compared to other similar Uniting Church food and bread ministry programs in NSW and ACT. The client group attending the grocery hamper program numbers around 40 people per week approximately two thirds of whom attend on a regular basis. These comprise a number of self-identified “street” people, as well as families on social security payments. There are also tertiary students from the local university and a small number of working poor households seeking to stretch their budget.

Significantly, the grocery hamper program operates primarily through word of mouth and has no formal referral arrangements with other agencies. In 2008 there were 14 organisations providing various forms of food assistance in Wagga Wagga.
on a regular basis; by 2013 this had been reduced to four. Several agencies have ceased operations or moved to providing vouchers or ad hoc assistance because of problems with managing both supply and demand issues for food.

The practicum was coordinated and arranged by Charles Sturt University in conjunction with the Wagga Wagga Community Development Coordinator from UnitingCare, who is employed as part of the UnitingCare Community Development Partnerships Program. Two social work students were selected based on their identified interests in pre-placement evaluations and each student completed approximately 500 hours of on-site experiential based learning as part of the field education requirements set out by the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (AASW, 2012). Two field educators were allocated to support the students: the on-site field educator was an appropriately qualified and experienced community development practitioner and worked at UnitingCare as a Community Development Coordinator; and the off-site field educator was a social work academic employed at the university. All four participants – the two social work students, and the field educators – had personal and professional interests in sustainability and the impacts of climate change on vulnerable groups, and are the authors of this paper.

Students undertook a range of activities on placement, including working at the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program which involved preparation and packaging of food, welcoming and supporting service users, and liaising with fellow volunteers. The students also participated in the formation of the Wagga District Food Group – a coalition of government and health, education and community service agencies looking to work collaboratively to improve the access, availability and usability of healthy food to vulnerable groups in the local government area. The students were able to influence the group to amend the group’s name from the “Food Coalition” to the “Food Group” as a result of informal feedback received from people accessing the program. Students undertook both mapping and consultative activities with welfare service providers about the access needs of people who use food services. In doing so the students developed a map showing where people could access food assistance, and also providing useful information to the group about the expectations that users have of these services. The map is on display in several key locations, including the
local hospital, Centrelink, library, and around the city. As part of the placement, students were also involved in the formation of a breakfast program and urban farm at two separate high schools.

**Critical reflective process**

A critical reflective approach was used throughout the field education placement to explore the issue of food insecurity for vulnerable groups. The question being asked was “What role do social workers have in addressing issues relating to food insecurity for vulnerable groups?” Critical reflective practice refers to a process of identifying (or uncovering) personal assumptions in order to make changes to professional practice (Fook & Gardner, 2007). First, the process required students to identify and examine their values, beliefs and assumptions. This involved reflection on the experience and articulation of the meaningful aspects of the placement experience during the events taking place, such as thoughts, feelings and actions. These experiences included conversations, meetings, group experiences, observations or a critical incident – virtually anything that elicited a reaction from the students or which unsettled them. Second, the reflective practice involved students identifying any gaps between their personal assumptions relating to the practice experiences and the profession of social work. Finally, the process involved the development of new perspectives and ways of thinking. This stage considered how to develop and improve social work practice, including possibilities for change in a broader societal context. Reflexivity and praxis were adopted, which involved an appreciation of the impacts of students’ behaviour on others and the use of theory to strengthen the critical reflection process. For example, critical theory was employed to question dominant discourses, such as neoliberalism, to provide alternative explanations for social issues through the examination of unequal power relationships (Fook, 2012; Healy, 2014). This approach encouraged consideration of the structural issues and political nature of issues relating to climate change and food insecurity, as well as the domination of powerful groups that might exist in the context of these issues (Fook, 2012).

Throughout placement activities, the students recorded their observations and experiences as part of field educators’ supervisory requirements. The students maintained written journals consisting of experiences, thoughts and ideas, and
brought these to the field educators for discussion and analysis. Together the students and field educators reflected on these and discussed them in relation to social work foundations for practice, including values and ethics, theory, education and practice.

As part of their learning, the social work students analysed the food relief programs at UnitingCare, particularly the Grocery Hamper and Bread Program, from a multidimensional perspective. Social work is characterised as having a systemic approach to practice that spans work with individuals, groups, communities, organisations and broader social and political systems (Connolly & Harms, 2012; Healy, 2012). Influential models reflecting this multidimensional approach to practice include ecological systems theory (Siporin, 1975), Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model, and Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) model and anti-oppressive practice (Connolly & Harms, 2012). This multidimensional approach to practice enables social workers to recognise the interconnectedness of human problems, in this case household food insecurity, from both individual and structural-based perspectives. Individual and family issues relating to household food insecurity and broader political and economic structures associated with this insecurity were considered.

The multidimensional approach to practice for analysing the program involves the micro, meso and macro domains of practice, which acknowledge the interconnected relationship between these three levels of practice. This model is widely adopted in social work education and is used in social work texts, including Healy (2012), Zastrow (2010) and Maidment and Egan (2004). The micro level of practice refers to work with individuals and families on a one-to-one basis and primarily deals with personal issues relating to income security, physical health, education, employment and emotional wellbeing. The meso level refers to direct work with groups and organisations, and the macro level of practice refers to work with broader systems, including communities, research and policy (Healy, 2012). The following discussion adopts this model to outline the students’ reflections relating to household food insecurity at each of these practice dimensions. Student reflections are presented below, in the first person, as part of the reflective process.
Discussion

Micro level of practice

At the individual level of practice we observed the food relief program to provide immediate assistance to individuals and families struggling with food affordability. Anecdotal evidence based on our informal conversations with service users identified the importance of receiving food supplies for providing a basic means of survival for a range of people, including low income families, university students, refugees and people who are unemployed and/or homeless. This problem-solving approach to social work practice is a common form of intervention and specific approaches, such as the task-centred approach, are commonly used to solve problems of daily living (Connolly & Harms, 2012). Other advantages we observed included the social experience and networking opportunities for service users – for example many ongoing relationships between service users and volunteers were observed throughout the placement. Although not directly observed by us in this case, food relief programs have the potential to provide a link or referral point to other welfare services.

However, we also critiqued problem-solving methods in relation to food insecurity because this approach is most useful for practical and short-term rather than long-term issues (Healy, 2014). Problem-solving approaches also lack a structural and critical level of analysis, for example by not responding to underlying oppression of vulnerable groups (Payne, 2014). In the case of food security, food relief programs do little to empower vulnerable groups and do not provide them with the ability to manage and control their own food sources. By contrast, we participated in the establishment of an urban farm at a local high school, a project initiated by the school and aimed towards providing a sustainable approach to food security. Based on these experiences, we were able to consider the importance of food relief programs as a short-term solution, but also the value of more sustainable community-based programs for longer-term solutions. These latter grassroots sustainable food practices ensure access to healthy foods whilst at the same time preserving the long-term viability of an environmentally friendly food production system (Besthorn, 2013).
Meso level of practice

At the meso level of practice, we identified benefits and challenges in relation to the organisational and group aspects of the food relief program. We were welcomed into the camaraderie of the team and developed positive relationships with the volunteers. We respected and admired the altruistic and unselfish attitudes of the volunteers who worked tirelessly with no recompense for the benefit of others. Volunteers consisted of both church members and non-church people and, at times, we could not distinguish between the volunteers and service users, which reflected the interchangeable roles, respect and acceptance of each person as being equal. Interestingly, several of the volunteers were from farming backgrounds and consequently discussed changing weather patterns, including recent droughts and floods, and the impacts these were having on local farm production, yet no real link was made about these variations in relation to climate change.

On the other hand, we identified conflicting issues relating to the role and purpose of the food relief program. While the program alleviated hunger, provided social support for many service users and contributed to community capacity, we felt it did little to provide a sustainable resolution to the problem of household food insecurity. Riches (2011) suggested that governments have a responsibility to address food insecurity as part of meeting the basic needs of citizens. While he acknowledges the role of food relief programs as crisis assistance, he contends they represent a failing public welfare system. This is becoming apparent in the United Kingdom where the process of structural reform to welfare since 2010 has seen a substantial increase in both the number and size of food assistance programs. Increasingly, these programs are trying to manage a client base with needs that extend beyond food relief, and include complex social and health issues (Lambie-Mumford, 2014).

Other issues we discussed in supervision relating to the meso level of practice involved the reliance on volunteers for the operation of the service. In this case, the volunteers were mostly beyond retirement age, which raised concerns about the sustainability of the service in the long term if younger volunteers are not recruited. Also, as a volunteer service, there were no defined or clear processes for responding to critical incidents or inappropriate behaviour of volunteers. While we felt that
training of the core group of volunteers would promote functionality within the team, we also acknowledged that this might erode the egalitarianism that existed amongst volunteers. This reflects the challenge that the increasing reliance upon volunteers, particularly from a church community, to providing services to vulnerable groups is altering both the social and spiritual contract of volunteering (Bellamy & Leonard, in press). An emphasis on training and supervising volunteers emerges because of the increasing levels of both skills needed and complexity of the work, and the behaviour and values necessary to undertake the work. There are also questions about whether the purpose of training is about development and growth or regulatory compliance.

Macro level of practice

At this level, we explored food security as a complex and multi-faceted issue. Not only is food security about access to food, but about a range of systemic issues including climate change, international trade issues, land ownership and the distribution of resources (Phillips, 2009). We examined the impact of neoliberalism in Australia. Neoliberalism emphasises the role of a free market and promotes profitmaking strategies, such as privatisation, free trade, deregulation and managerialism (Mullaly, 2007). By undertaking an audit of low-cost/free food providers in the community, we examined the level of government support for vulnerable groups struggling with household food insecurity. We found that government responses to household food insecurity are limited. Apart from income benefits received from the Federal government through Centrelink, direct access to food for vulnerable groups in Wagga Wagga is provided by four faith-based organisations: Uniting Church, St Vincent de Paul, Salvation Army and Wagga Anglican Parish. Of these, only the Uniting Church has a dedicated focus on food assistance. This relates to Riches’ (2011) critique that food relief in economically advanced countries is considered a matter of charity by governments, rather than a political issue related to citizenship rights.

Neoliberalism has caused significant structural and social change for Australian farmers and rural communities (Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007). We observed the efforts of Foodbank NSW and Uniting Church volunteer groups to divert tonnes of useable fresh produce grown in western Riverina farms to charity. Many farmers
who experienced difficulty in attracting buyers willing to pay adequate prices chose to donate their produce in return for a charitable tax donation certificate. Farming businesses increasingly have to adhere to rigid standards as supermarkets adopt various tactics to manage the supply chain and control prices (Lawrence, Richards, & Lyons, 2013). Over time, many farmers have been disempowered in this process and forced to leave the industry. The subsequent withdrawal of services in rural areas, such as banking institutions, government services, and private businesses, has exacerbated rural disadvantage and is linked with high rates of unemployment and poverty (Cheers et al., 2007).

As part of our placement we also were involved in the formation of a breakfast program at a high school and became aware of a large number of school students buying breakfast at a nearby fast food outlet on their way to school. We therefore considered how the market dominance of relatively few global and national corporations across the food sector has shaped choices about the accessibility, affordability and usability of food for vulnerable groups, especially in relation to optimal nutritional value, which can in some cases compromise health and wellbeing (Burns, 2004).

By applying the AASW codes of ethics to household food insecurity, we were able to ask questions relating to equality and fairness. If Australia produces enough food to feed 60 million people, yet still pockets of household food insecurity exist, then distributive and social justice issues need to be addressed. Distributive and social justice issues relevant to food security involve the equitable allocation of goods that sustain access to food. Several documents pertinent to food security are relevant to social work, including the national AASW Code of Ethics, the IFSW Ethical Statements, and the UN Declaration of Human Rights (Article 25). These documents suggest an ethical imperative for social workers to respond to current household food security issues as a matter of social justice and human rights. The effects of anthropogenic climate change pose increasing challenges to ensuring food security in Australia, not only to the agricultural industry, but to vulnerable groups who are affected disproportionately by climate change impacts.
From a positive perspective, we reflected on how food redistribution services such as Foodbank contribute to reducing food wastage in Australia and decreasing adverse environmental impacts by redistributing excess food. A national food waste assessment (Mason, Boyle, Fyfe, Smith, & Cordell, 2011) undertaken for the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities estimated that one-third of community waste is food and one-fifth of commercial and industrial waste is food (equivalent to 7.5 million tonnes of food wastage in total). Using greenhouse gas emission factors published by the Australian Government Department of Climate Change and Energy Efficiency, it is estimated that approximately 6.8 million tonnes of carbon dioxide is produced by sending this waste to landfill. It is estimated that Foodbank collected and redistributed 10,000 tonnes of edible food in 2009–10 (Mason et al., 2011). This assessment report indicates the importance of redistribution food services in promoting positive environmental outcomes.

**Implications for Social Work Education**

Using a critical reflective approach we were able to analyse a range of issues relating to food insecurity and social work at the micro, meso and macro domains of practice. Our knowledge and understanding increased which indicates that the field education experience expanded our perspectives about the complex interplay between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. This field education provided us with a unique opportunity to integrate knowledge developed during the course work component of learning to the practice context. This means for example that, during the practicum, we were given the opportunity to explore theory, values and ethics in relation to food insecurity and apply these to the practice context. After interacting with vulnerable groups such as homeless people, low-income families and unemployed people, we reflected on questions such as “How are vulnerable groups impacted by climate change, particularly with regard to food security?” and “What role does social work have in addressing social justice issues relating to food insecurity?” These questions raised pertinent issues and provided the context for rich discussions during supervision about the interconnectedness between the natural environment and human health and wellbeing.
Although awareness about the relevance of climate change in social work is increasing, the integration of the natural environment in social work education is still in the development phase. Jones’ (2013) content analysis of online curricula from 27 Australian social work courses, indicated there is little evidence for the inclusion of the natural environment or sustainability in curriculum content. Field education can provide the opportunity to expand curriculum content by providing practicums with an ecological focus, such as food security, thereby strengthening overall course design. This expansion not only reflects current trends within the profession, but also helps to address the ethical imperative now placed on practitioners to promote sustainability as part of practice (AASW, 2010).

Nevertheless, whilst commendable, the extension of field education opportunities with an ecological focus represent an “add-on” curriculum initiative, which is highly dependent on available placements and identified interests in student pre-placement evaluations. Jones (2013) advocated a “transformative” approach to curriculum design (pp. 219–220). He described three approaches to developing a more ecologically informed curriculum, including the “bolt-on”, “embedded” and “transformative” (pp. 217–220). Each approach represents a higher order of integration; however, the transformative approach is the most radical and requires a substantial shift in orientation by developing deep understandings of the natural world. A key aspect of transforming social work curricula is the incorporation of principles relating to deep ecology, reflecting human harmony and holism with nature (Besthorn & Canda, 2002). One of the most confronting future challenges for social work transformative curriculum design is acknowledging that the profession was born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, for example, by growing nationalist welfare states that support capitalist endeavours (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). This has resulted in an inherent assumption within social work that humans govern the natural world, rather than being interdependent with it (Coates, 2005), and this presents an incongruency with transformative curriculum design.

In order to nurture a deeper understanding of the interdependence between people and the natural environment, an ecologically informed curriculum would benefit from adopting a range of experiential techniques including field education, study abroad programs, nature-based activities and interactive skills programs.
Experiential learning enables students to make personal contact with the natural environment and to engage with real-life issues. This accords with Kolb’s (1984) model of experiential learning where a concrete experience is followed by reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. In addition to experiential approaches to education, the embedding of ecological principles across the curricula is needed to enhance knowledge and provide the foundation for ecologically informed practice. This may involve: developing a broadened theoretical understanding of the social environment to include nature (Zapf, 2010); the acknowledgment of social work’s origins in modernism and the impact this has had on the profession’s view of nature (Coates, 2005); and the ability to apply values of social justice and human rights to environmental issues (Dominelli, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2012). Skills relating to advocacy, casework, group work, community-based interventions, policy development and research are important for promoting sustainability and an ecological focus in practice.

Implications for social work education at the macro level involve the rewriting and updating of professional policy documents, including the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards (ASWEAS). The ASWEAS document provides guidelines to education providers about principles, standards and graduate attributes and states “Australian entry-level professional social work education recognises that social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural, spiritual and physical environments” (AASW, 2012, p. 5, section 2). However, the term “physical” is not defined and the pragmatics of how this occurs systematically across university curricula are uncertain. Given that the AASW Code of Ethics is the foundation document that informs all other policy documents and requires Australian social workers to incorporate sustainability in practice (see for example, Sections 1.3, 3.1, 3.2, 5.1.3), it would be expected that the ASWEAS would follow suit. A national approach for integrating the natural environment into Australian social work education is required to prepare graduates for increasing practice demands relating to climate change.
Conclusion

Australian social workers, in accordance with the AASW Code of Ethics (2010), are required to incorporate pro-environmental values into day-to-day practice for the wellbeing of individuals, groups, communities and the ecosystem. Such an ethical imperative requires social work education to adequately prepare graduates to understand the complex interplay between the natural environment and human health and wellbeing. Field education has provided one such opportunity that enabled two social work students to integrate knowledge developed during the course work component of the curriculum into the practice context. However, while field education represents an important dimension to expanding an ecologically informed curriculum, a more transformative approach to social work education is required.

An analysis of a social work practicum with a focus on food insecurity was used to explore social work’s role in working towards sustainability in practice. Using a critically reflective approach, the benefits and challenges associated with faith-based food relief programs and food insecurity were explored at the micro, meso and macro levels of practice. Student knowledge and understanding was observed to increase, indicating that this field education experience expanded students’ perspectives about the interplay between climate change, food insecurity and vulnerability. Collaborating with this faith-based food relief program overall provided a constructive pathway for developing a social work contribution to a sustainable environment.

Notes

1 Centrelink is a service agency of the Australian government Department of Human Services. Centrelink delivers payments and services for retirees, job seekers, families, carers, parents, people with disabilities, Indigenous Australians, and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and provides services at times of major change (http://www.humanservices.gov.au/corporate/about-us/ accessed 1/04/2015).
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Publication 4: Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics

Reference details:

Abstract

This article examines the extent to which issues of environmental sustainability are represented in three national social work codes of ethics – the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. These national codes are discussed and implications for social work are analysed with a view to strengthening the profession’s position regarding environmental sustainability. Findings suggest that national codes do not include concern for environmental sustainability as a core professional concern. The authors make recommendations for developing ethical practice and further argue that the international professional body of social work, the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), should take a fundamental leadership role in advocating for environmental sustainability.

*Keywords*: Codes of ethics, eco-social work, environment, natural environment, social work ethics, sustainability

Introduction

Social workers are immersed in dealing with the consequences of climate change as part of everyday practice. Activities associated with climate change manifest across a broad range of issues traversing micro to macro practice, whether it is crisis work with families trapped in poverty unable to pay rising energy costs, the development of a school breakfast programme to contribute to food security for school children, or systemic social work action following large-scale natural disasters. As a result, the impetus for a professional response to climate change is gaining momentum (Alston and Besthorn, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012; Kemp, 2011; McKinnon, 2012a) and progress towards articulating the purpose and scope of social work in the context of climate change is taking place.
An important indicator of social work’s position in relation to climate change is in the expression of values and principles held within professional codes of ethics, documents which also address the purpose and scope of the profession. This article examines the social work codes of ethics of three nations: the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. Through a comparative analysis, it explores whether and how social work codes in these countries incorporate ideas and attitudes towards the natural environment, environmental sustainability and ‘green’ approaches to social work. Comparisons between these national codes are made and the implications for social work discussed. Recommendations with a view to strengthening social work’s professional position in relation to environmental sustainability conclude the article.

We recognise that the three codes we explore are part of the ‘global North and West’ (Banks, 2012), the group of dominant affluent, industrialised English-speaking countries which are traditionally characterised by individualism, capitalism and democracy. We selected these countries for an initial examination of social work codes of ethics and the natural environment in the first instance because we noticed changes in our own Australian code of ethics and wanted to explore whether the codes from the two nations who arguably most influence Australian social work – the United Kingdom and United States – have made similar changes. Related reasons include that these countries share similar political, economic, cultural and philosophical heritages with Australia, which provide a common ground from which to compare similarities and differences in social work codes. Finally, historically the United Kingdom and United States introduced social work to Australia and the rest of the world (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2015). It is likely that what is occurring in the profession in these countries influences the profession internationally for better or worse.

Environmental sustainability in social work

Over the last decade, climate change has received international attention with the release of several documents, such as the Stern (2007) Review in Britain, the Garnaut (2008) Review in Australia, Al Gore’s (2006) documentary ‘An Inconvenient Truth’ in the United States, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change reports (IPCC, 2007, 2013). These reports provide convincing evidence by contemporary scientists
that an increase in greenhouse gas emissions is causing unprecedented changes in climate, with a significant anthropogenic cause. In addition to this, overall trends indicate that extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity across the world due to climate change, such as severe drought, bushfires, heatwaves, floods and storms (Climate Commission, 2013; Climate Council, 2013a, 2013b).

While climatic events can result in large-scale economic costs for families and communities, social impacts can also have devastating outcomes, such as widespread food and water shortages (Alston and Kent, 2004); displacement and homelessness (Besthorn and Myer, 2010); increases in death rates of vulnerable groups, such as those suffering from health conditions (Lam, 2007; McMichael et al., 2006); significant psychological issues for people experiencing trauma (Dean and Stain, 2010; Morrissey and Reser, 2007), and behavioural issues associated with domestic violence and drug abuse (Anderson, 2001). Social work commentators note that countries from the global North and West contribute disproportionately to climate change, whereas populations from global Southern and Eastern nations bear the brunt of many of the costs of climate change (Alston and Besthorn, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012; Kemp, 2011). As a result, concerns within social work are emerging, particularly at the international level, and many contemporary commentators have realised the profound social impact these climatic events have on human health and well-being (Alston and Besthorn, 2012; Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Peeters, 2012).

Although social work has traditionally adopted an environmental perspective in practice, the emphasis on environment has almost exclusively comprised a socio-cultural focus (McKinnon, 2008). Ecological systems theory had a major impact on social work with early work from Siporin (1975), and Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model, which introduced the concept of ‘person-in-environment’. These approaches emphasised the ‘social’ element of practice with specific focus on the relationships between individuals and their social environment (Healy, 2005; Payne, 2005).

However, Zapf (2010) points out exceptions to this early socio-cultural focus on the environment and draws attention to early writings of Germain (1981) and Weick
(1981), who raised concern about the neglect of the physical environment in social work. Subsequent social work writings examined the impact of the physical environment on health (Soine, 1987), and the role of social work in adapting to ecological change (Berger and Kelly, 1993). Further developments occurred with Hoff and Polack (1993), Hoff and McNutt (1994), and Berger (1995), who provided a comprehensive abridgment of the relationship between social work and the natural environment in the context of climate change. The authors of this article understand the term ‘natural environment’ to have the meaning discussed by Maller et al. (2005):

For the purposes of this paper, nature is defined as an organic environment where the majority of ecosystem processes are present (e.g. birth, death, reproduction, relationships between species). This includes the spectrum of habitats from wilderness areas to farms and gardens. Nature also refers to any single element of the natural environment (such as plants, animals, soil, water or air), and includes domestic and companion animals as well as cultivated pot plants. Nature can also refer collectively to the geological, evolutionary, biophysical and biochemical processes that have occurred throughout time to create the Earth as it is today. (p. 46)

While discussion of the concept of sustainability has largely moved past the oft-cited definition of sustainable development suggested by the Brundtland Commission (World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), 1987), the concept remains contested and challenging (Blewitt, 2015; Washington, 2015). In general, however, sustainability can be thought of as referring to ‘systems and processes that are able to operate and persist on their own over long periods of time’ (Robertson, 2014: 3). Commentators often distinguish between different aspects of sustainability, including social, economic and environmental, while recognising that these are inherently interconnected. For the purposes of this article, the authors draw on Robertson’s (2014) discussion in understanding environmental sustainability as referring to:

... the dynamic, cyclical, and interdependent nature of all the parts and pieces of life on earth, from the soil under our feet to the whole planet we call home, from the interactions of humans with their habitats and each other to the invisible
chemical cycles that have been redistributing water, oxygen, carbon, and nitrogen for millions of years. (p. 3)

Despite a growing awareness of environmental sustainability within the profession, and increasing attention in the social work literature, there have been relatively few empirical studies concerned with whether and how social workers incorporate concerns about the environmental sustainability and ecological issues into their practice. Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) asked social workers from New Mexico in the United States and KwaZulu Natal in South Africa about whether a concern with environmental issues was part of their professional practice. In this study ‘environmental issues’ were explicitly identified as referring to the physical and biological environment, rather than the social environment. While around 93 percent of the responding social workers across both countries reported environmental issues were important to them personally, a lower percentage but still a majority (71%) reported that environmental issues are important to the profession. Less than half of both groups (around 46%) actually incorporated environmental issues into their practice. More recently a much larger sample from California (n=373 or 38.4% of National Association of Social Workers (NASW) members in that state) was overwhelmingly in favour of having social work and the natural environment discussed as part of social work education (90.08%; Shaw, 2013: 15). Of relevance to our study is that over two-thirds of the respondents were not aware that NASW has an environmental statement, over 20 percent incorrectly believed this statement does not exist, and only 41 respondents (11%) correctly reported that NASW does have this statement (Shaw, 2013: 15). Shaw (2013) concludes,

... professional social work organizations believe that there is an obligation to incorporate environmental issues into social work, and the results of this survey show that California NASW members think these issues should be included in social work and social work education. (p. 26)

In Australia, McKinnon (2010) published the results of a doctoral study exploring environmental consciousness among Australian social workers. She found that social workers experience considerable pressure to leave their environmental concerns in their own private realm rather than expressing them in the workplace.
This pressure is perceived to come from co-workers, managers, funding bodies and organisational structures. Although social work’s response to climate change has been slow relative to increasing scientific evidence, efforts to recognise the centrality of the natural and physical environment as a social justice issue for human health and well-being and an extension of the person-in-environment focus continue to emerge (Kemp, 2011). These developments are currently being articulated in areas of social work theory (Bell, 2012; Besthorn, 2012; Green and McDermott, 2010; Norton, 2012), practice (Heinsch, 2012), education (Besthorn and Canda, 2002; Jones, 2012) and policy (Boetto and McKinnon, 2013).

There are many pathways by which concern for environmental sustainability and the natural environment can be incorporated into social work. Writers such as Miller et al. (2012) and Green and McDermott (2010) advocate extending the notion of ‘person-in-environment’ to explicitly include the natural environment in social work’s focus. Gray and Coates (2012) explore the notion of environmental ethics applied to social work. Alston and Besthorn (2012) ‘… argue that attention to human-rights-based practice and anti-oppressive practice is the basis for social work in the area of environment and sustainability’ (p. 65), while McKinnon (2012a) asserts that it is the nexus of social justice and environmental justice that brings sustainability to the forefront of social work consciousness. What these authors share as part of their concern to incorporate the natural environment into social work is the belief that environmental sustainability is, in addition to theoretical and practical dimensions, an ethical issue. This raises the question of whether and how environmental sustainability and concern for the natural environment are incorporated into current statements of social work ethics. It also raises the question of whether the profession’s notions of justice can be expanded to more fully include the natural world. This would include recognising the importance of environmental justice, but also moving towards ecological justice or ‘justice toward the natural world’ (Schlosberg, 2001: 1). Besthorn (2012) recognises the difference between environmental ethos, which shows concern for the impacts of the natural environment on humans, and ecological justice. Ecological justice is a more radical term, involving a reconceptualisation of humans as part of the natural world. Ecological justice emphasises a deep interdependent relationship with the natural world.
environment, including justice with regard to the health, well-being and protection of the world’s natural ecosystems.

**The international context of environmental sustainability and social work**

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is an organisation that represents social work within an international context to promote social change from a human rights and social justice perspective. The IFSW represents 116 social work member countries by providing a united voice to international bodies, such as the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the World Health Organization (WHO) among others. In addition to this, the IFSW states in its constitution that it has a contribution to make at the national level of social work, such as in the formulation of national policies with regard to the development of social work training, values and standards (IFSW, 2014a). It can therefore be concluded that the IFSW is a global organisation for social work with responsibilities relating to representation, leadership and support at both the international and national levels of social work.

With regard to environmental sustainability and the natural environment, the IFSW has made various contributions. For example, the IFSW, in partnership with International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council of Social Welfare (ICSW), published the *Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development Commitment to Action* in March 2012 (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), 2012). This document outlines five specific commitments for action during 2012–2016, including the promotion of ‘sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development’ aimed at protecting the natural environment. However the status of this document within the IFSW remains unclear. Over 18 months later, at the time of writing, it is not listed as an IFSW policy, resolution, statement or even publication on the website. A link to it can be found within a link in the ‘Get Involved’ section. If the document is as important to international social work and the IFSW as Jones and Truell (2012) claim, this is a rather puzzling location, especially for an international organisation that relies for much of its communication and presence on its website.
A new international definition of social work has recently been presented and ratified at the General Meeting in Melbourne, Australia in July 2014. The Executive Committee of IFSW and the Board of IASSW conducted a review and consultation process for amending the previous international definition. The new definition defines social work in this manner:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels. (IFSW and IASSW, 2014)

Unfortunately, this new definition of social work, approved by both IFSW and IASSW Executive/Board, has omitted all mention of the term ‘environment’. The previous definition of social work stated, ‘... social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments’ (IFSW and IASSW, 2000). This omission of the term ‘environment’ removes an important motivator/rationale for national associations to include the natural environment in their definitions of the purpose and meaning of social work. While the commentary following the definition refers to the term environment nine times, with one of these having specific reference to the natural environment, the order of these does little to place the natural environment as a central concern to social work.

The IFSW also has other references to environmental sustainability within its policy documents, most notably in the ‘Statement of Ethical Principles’ and the ‘Globalisation and Environment’ policy. The IFSW’s Statement of Ethical Principles makes specific mention of the natural environment once as part of the principle of human rights and dignity, where each person is to be treated as a whole, including within the context of the ‘natural’ environment. The Globalisation and Environment policy arguably makes the most detailed reference to the natural environment of all the IFSW documents, clearly identifying the natural environment as critical for human
survival. Interestingly, the document indicates the previous definition of social work (IFSW and IASSW, 2000) has a ‘natural’ environmental meaning, despite now being superseded by the new definition that omits this. The Globalisation and Environment policy states,

The IFSW-IASSW Definition of Social Work (Appendix 1) states: “social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments”. There is also a clear link to the Ethics of Social Work, in terms of our obligation to challenge unjust policies and practices and to seek solutions based on solidarity … our communities have been rediscovering that a positive social environment is not possible without a sustainable natural environment. It is generally accepted that our natural environment not only influences but also is crucial for our social lives now and in the future. (IFSW and IASSW, 2014)

Although this statement details an explanation of the interdependent relationship between human health and well-being and the natural environment, this message is not reflected in other IFSW documents, including the new definition of social work which is largely used in the development of national codes of ethics. While from the brief analysis of documents the IFSW has expressed some concern for environmental sustainability, this does not appear to reflect the magnitude of the environmental crisis. Given that the environmental crisis disproportionately affects the least advantaged citizens in society, the IFSW has a responsibility of representation, leadership and support at the international and national levels of social work.

**Sustainability and social work ethics: Findings from three national codes**

Codes of ethics developed by professional bodies in Australia, the United States and the United Kingdom were reviewed with a view to identifying the extent to which environmental sustainability and the natural environment are now explicitly represented in those codes. Results of this review are presented here, recording the instances where ‘environment’, ‘ecology’, ‘green’ and/or ‘sustainability’ appear in each code.
British Social Work Code of Ethics

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the professional body overseeing social work in the United Kingdom. The current version of the BASW Code of Ethics was adopted in 2012, based on extensive consultations with members and stakeholders. The British Association of Social Work (BASW) (2012) notes that the aim of the code ‘... is to encourage social workers across the UK to reflect on the challenges and dilemmas that face them and make ethically informed decisions about how to act in each particular case in accordance with the values of the profession’ (p. 5. Section 1.1).

Examination of the BASW code reveals no direct mention of issues relating to ‘sustainability’, ‘ecology’, or ‘green’ approaches to social work. The term ‘environment’ does however appear in the code at a number of points:

1. ‘Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments’ (IFSW and IASSW, 2000, in BASW, 2012: 6, Section 1.2). (Note: This is the definition of social work drawn from the International Federation of Social Workers.)

2. ‘[social work addresses the] complex transactions between people and their environments’ (BASW, 2012: 6, Section 1.2).

3. ‘[social work] recognises the complexity of interactions between human beings and their environment, and the capacity of people both to be affected by and to alter the multiple influences upon them including bio-psychosocial factors’ (BASW, 2012: 7, Section 1.2).

4. ‘Social work utilises a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments’ (BASW, 2012: 7, Section 1.2).

5. ‘Social workers should be concerned with the whole person, within the family, community, societal and natural environments, and should seek to recognise all aspects of a person’s life’ (BASW, 2012: 8, Section 2.1).
While all of the uses of ‘environment’ identified in the BASW Code of Ethics could be read to include, at least in part, considerations of the natural environment, it is the last of these that most clearly and explicitly articulates a concern with the natural environment and its relationship to human well-being. This clause echoes the human rights clause in the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles: Section 4.1.3 mentioned earlier, which also refers directly to natural environments.

US Social Work Code of Ethics

The NASW is the body responsible for guiding professional social work in the United States. The current NASW code of ethics was revised in 2008. The code is described by the NASW (2013) as being ‘… intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers’.

Similar to the findings for the BASW code, no explicit mention of issues relating to ‘sustainability’, ‘ecology’ or ‘green’ approaches appears in the NASW code. The terms ‘environment’ and ‘environmental’ do, however, appear in the code at a small number of points.

1. ‘A historic and defining feature of social work is the profession’s focus on individual wellbeing in a social context and the wellbeing of society. Fundamental to social work is attention to the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living’ (NASW, 2008: 1).

2. ‘Social work administrators should take reasonable steps to ensure that the working environment for which they are responsible is consistent with and encourages compliance with the NASW Code of Ethics’ (NASW, 2008: 12, Section 3.07).

3. ‘Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments’ (NASW, 2008: 15, Section 6.01).

While the second of these occurrences is clearly concerned with the working conditions of practitioners, the first and third instances could be read as expressing a
concern, at least in part, with the natural environment and its role in shaping human experience.

Although not a part of the formal code of ethics, it should be noted that the NASW has a separate policy statement on the environment, last revised in 2009. This policy statement reviews the place of the environment in social work theory and practice and articulates a strong position on the responsibilities of social workers towards the natural environment. Among other things, the policy statement calls for the incorporation of environmental issues into social work education and the broadening of social work practice methods and techniques to better consider the natural environment (NASW, 2009). In particular, the statement argues that ‘Social workers must become dedicated protectors of the environment’ (NASW, 2009: 126). Given Shaw’s (2013) findings discussed earlier, that the majority of Californian NASW members are not aware of this statement, it is reasonable to conclude that it has played little or no role in social workers’ growing concern to incorporate the natural environment into social work education and practice, also documented by Shaw. We conclude that while this is a potentially powerful document, its impact would be greatly improved if it were publicly and freely accessible and/or explicitly linked to the NASW Code of Ethics.

**Australian Social Work Code of Ethics**

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) is the professional body responsible for guiding professional social work in Australia. The AASW Code of Ethics was revised in 2010. Although examination of the code shows no direct mention of ‘ecology’ or ‘green’ approaches to social work, the terms ‘physical’, ‘natural’ and ‘sustainable’ do appear in relation to the environment. In addition, other references to the environment occur in the code, which could be read to include, at least in part, consideration of the natural environment.

1. ‘Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments’ (IFSW, 2000, in AASW, 2010: 7, Section 1.1). (Note: This is the definition of social work drawn from the International Federation of Social Work).
2. (Social work involves) ‘Working with individuals, groups and communities, through both advocacy and policy reform initiatives in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic, environmental and political resources’ (AASW, 2010: 8. Section 1.2).

3. ‘Social work operates at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments’ (AASW, 2010: 9. Section 1.3).

4. ‘The social work profession also recognises that social work takes place in a context whereby social systems have a mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment’ (AASW, 2010: 9. Section 1.3).

5. ‘The social work profession holds that every human being has a unique and inherent equal worth and that each person has a right to wellbeing, self-fulfilment and self-determination consistent with the rights and culture of others and a sustainable environment’ (AASW, 2010: 12, Section 3.1).

6. ‘The social work profession promotes the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing’ (AASW, 2010: 13, Section 3.2).

7. ‘Social workers will aim to empower individuals, families, groups, communities and societies in the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic, environmental and political resources’ (AASW, 2010: 19, Section 5.1.3, Clause C).

8. ‘Social workers will meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in action to promote societal and environmental wellbeing’ (AASW, 2010: 20, Section 5.1.3, Clause J).

9. ‘Social workers will advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society’ (AASW, 2010: 20, Section 5.1.3, clause M).

10. ‘Social workers will provide and/or advocate for staff to have a physical working environment which supports effective practice, including appropriate arrangements for confidential interviewing and storage of confidential records’ (AASW, 2010: 34, Section 5.4, clause G).
With the exception of the last of these instances, all of these mentions of the environment either deal explicitly with, or could be understood to include reference to, the natural environment and its role in shaping human experience.

**Comparative analysis**

The comparison of the way in which issues pertaining to the natural environment are represented in these three codes of ethics is revealing (Table 1). Perhaps most striking is the simple observation that despite the scale and nature of the global environmental crisis and its impact on human well-being, and despite the increasing calls for social work to engage in this area, the natural environment as a core concern for the social work profession remains relatively poorly recognised in codes of ethics. This is clearest in the British and American codes, where an explicit mention of the natural environment is almost non-existent. Where such mention does occur, once, in the BASW code, the natural environment sits within a list of factors representing aspects of a person’s life (BASW, 2012: 8, Section 2.1) rather than as a unique and inherently significant concern for the profession, and is a direct quote from the fourth aspect of human rights and dignity, taken from the IFSW (2004) Statement of Ethical Principles.

By comparison, the Australian code reflects greater recognition of the natural environment and its significance for social work as a profession. In particular, there are a number of instances in the AASW code where the natural environment is singled out as a specific concern for social workers, and where the connection between environmental issues and human/social well-being are made explicit (AASW, 2010: 9. Section 1.3; p. 13, Section 3.2; p. 20, Section 5.1.3, Clause J; p. 20, Section 5.1.3, clause M). It is worth noting that the first of these examples occurs early in the code, in the description of the context of social work, where it is recognised that this is ‘a context whereby social systems have a mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment’ (AASW, 2010: 9, Section 1.3). Also noteworthy is that, while not identified independently as a core value of the profession, protection of the natural environment is given explicit recognition in the discussion of one of these core values, social justice (AASW, 2010: 13, Section 3.2).
The AASW code illustrates the potential for the natural environment to be identified in codes of ethics as a core concern for the profession. While this is laudable, it can be argued that there is scope for further and more explicit integration into the AASW code, and a pressing necessity for the inclusion of this concern into the BASW and NASW codes. Greater recognition of the importance of the natural environment in these codes would have significant implications across a number of important dimensions of the social work profession.

Implications for social work

We have noted that social work codes aim to do more than simply describe ethically acceptable or unacceptable behaviours. By articulating core professional values and identifying aims and objectives of professional practice, codes seek to describe what it means to be a professional social worker. In this sense, codes of ethics play an important role in articulating a professional social work ‘identity’, presenting a vision of who social workers are, what they value, how they should behave in practice, and

Table 1. Social work code of ethics–inclusion of environment

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<td>Mentions of environment explicitly relating to socio-cultural environment</td>
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<td>Mentions of environment not distinguishing between socio-cultural and natural environment</td>
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<td>2</td>
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what issues are rightly seen as the concerns and focus of professional social work practice.

International and national codes of ethics therefore are foundational documents serving to shape professional social work identity and to establish the parameters of social work interest and action. In the face of the overwhelming evidence of the significance, scope and impact of current environmental issues, including climate change, it becomes particularly important to consider the implications of the degree to which environmental concerns are, or are not, identified and discussed within social work codes of ethics.

With the possible exception of the Australian code of ethics, the findings from this study indicate that currently social work in these countries does not include concern for the natural environment as a core element of professional identity or an identified foundation for ethical practice within its defining documents. However, evidence from the literature suggests that concern for the environment is an emerging priority for social workers themselves. This requires stronger expression in national ethical statements.

An important finding from this brief review of how environmental sustainability and the natural environment is referred to in three national social work codes of ethics is the profound influence of the previous international definition (IFSW and IASSW, 2000) of social work and the current ethical statement in framing and wording national social work documents in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. In the case of the United States and the United Kingdom, references to the natural environment flow directly from the way the term ‘environment’ is used in the international statements. The Australian code has developed more specific references to the natural environment beyond the general statements in the international documents (as recommended by the international documents themselves), but this has not occurred in the US or UK codes. In both these codes, the limited references to the environment that do exist can be traced directly to the previous international definition (IFSW and IASSW, 2000) of social work and/or the international ethical statement.
These findings indicate that, in relation to environmental sustainability and the natural environment, two out of three of the national social work associations have not acted upon the IFSW’s assumption that principles outlined generally at the international level will be interpreted more specifically within national, cultural, legal and policy contexts. While the NASW has produced a national environmental statement, we have noted the evidence that even NASW members are not aware of its existence (Shaw, 2013). We wonder how a policy document that is not visible in the public arena can be expected to influence policy or practice or to provide transparency or any measure of accountability against which achievements of the profession can be measured.

We argue that rather than having separate environmental policies of uncertain status, clear unequivocal statements about the importance of the natural environment, and social work’s responsibilities in relation to this, must be embedded in international and national codes of ethics – the foundation documents which define the profession.

Further research is needed to explore whether social workers are aware of and/or are influenced by how the natural environment is regarded in codes of ethics. This applies especially to Australian social work, where the most noticeable changes to the code in relation to the natural environment have occurred. Further research is also needed into whether and how social work is incorporating the natural environment into education, practice and policy.

Given the influence of the IFSW documents in the wording of national documents, it is likely that the removal of any reference to the environment in the new international definition (IFSW and IASSW, 2014) will lead member countries to follow suit. Indeed, the recently published Australian Practice Standards (AASW, 2013) include the 2013 international draft definition, which has no reference to the term environment at all. We wonder what effect this exclusion will have on the emerging priority of environmental sustainability and the natural environment in social work.

As documents which have an important role in shaping professional identity, articulating core values and describing legitimate fields of practice, the explicit inclusion of the natural environment in ethical codes will establish the environment as
a valid and important concern for social work and social workers. There are a number of specific suggestions for how this might be done. It is our recommendation that

1. the IFSW provides leadership by including an explicit concern with environmental sustainability and the natural environment in the international definition of social work;

2. the IFSW *Statement of Ethical Principles* should be amended to include a concern with the natural environment and ecological justice as one of the core values of social work;

3. national codes of ethics should distinguish between socio-cultural and ‘natural’ uses of the term environment;

4. national codes of ethics should include an explicit and specific concern with the natural environment as part of the descriptions and/or definitions of social work;

5. national codes of ethics should identify a concern with the natural environment and ecological justice as one of the core values of social work;

6. where ethical standards are presented as sets of principles (as in the BASW code), they should include a specific ethical principle directed at the protection of the natural environment and working towards environmental sustainability;

7. where ethical standards are expressed as sets of responsibilities (as in the NASW and AASW codes), they should articulate social workers’ ethical responsibilities to the natural environment – this could take the form of a separate category of responsibilities, or as one of the general ethical responsibilities of practitioners;

8. further research should be undertaken into social workers’ awareness of codes of ethics’ approach to the natural environment and any impacts on practice and education.
Conclusion

Following this review of how concern for the natural environment is represented in three national social work codes of ethics and the finding that in the main any reference to the natural environment flows directly from IFSW definitions and the ethical statement, we conclude that concepts of working towards environmental sustainability and protection of the natural environment must be included in the international definition of social work and future Statement of Ethical Principles. Climate change and the degradation of the natural environment pose a global threat of such urgency and magnitude that general statements about working towards human rights and social justice without reference to these concepts are no longer sufficient.

If social work is to actively participate in the international response to climate change, the IFSW needs to provide strong leadership. A clear and unequivocal international definition of social work that incorporates concern for the natural environment is needed. Also needed is an ethical statement that includes concern for environmental sustainability and the natural environment and ecological or environmental justice as part of social work’s quest for social justice and human rights. National associations of social work need to decide whether responding to the environmental crisis falls within the remit of social work’s core business. If so, there is much to be done to incorporate concern for the natural environment as an explicit priority for mainstream social work in national codes of ethics.

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Publication 5: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective

Reference details: 

**Abstract**

This paper reports on a small-scale research study that explores the impact of climate change on rural women. Qualitative data were collected through interviews with 7 women, who came from a regional centre and were either employed by women’s services or who had activist roles within the community pertaining to women’s services. Outcomes of the study identified a range of areas of impact, including increased hardship for rural women, implications of household roles, and subsequent organisational responsibilities. A high level of concern, particularly for the vulnerability of women in crisis, was identified among participants. We contend that the effects of climate change are becoming increasingly relevant to the social work profession and that specific groups such as women are at risk of further disadvantage unless collective action is taken to circumvent the impact of climate change. Strategies for social work practice and policy initiatives are considered.

**Keywords**: Environmental Social Work; Rural Social Work; Women

Social work literature reflects a growing engagement between the social work profession and environmental issues, and changes to the 2010 version of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010) Code of ethics brings environmental issues to the forefront for Australian social workers. Environmental impact is relevant to practitioners in a range of fields of practice, and the AASW Code of ethics now requires Australian social workers to be active in the pursuit of a healthy environment (AASW, 2010). Coates and Gray (2012) made the point that professional interventions in social work should address more than personal stress and family reactions to climate-related issues in order to be effective. They suggested that there are also significant lifestyle, public policy, and community issues to be addressed if social work is to assist in any move toward a more sustainable society.
Introduction

Social Impact of Climate Change

Much evidence by contemporary scientists reveals serious concerns for the environment and the increase in greenhouse gas emissions that is causing unprecedented rises in temperatures (Garnaut, 2008; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2007; Stern, 2007). Regardless of where one might be positioned in the climate change debate, climate variability has caused significant destabilisation for both urban and rural Australians alike. Most particularly, Australia has encountered extreme weather events that are viewed by some scientologists as being linked to climate change outcomes (Australian Farm Institute, 2007; Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation & Bureau of Meteorology [CSIRO & BoM], 2007). Widespread drought caused considerable water shortages across the country and significant decline in food production for much of the 21st century (Alston, 2006, 2010; Alston & Kent, 2004). Other climatic events include an increase in the number of devastating bushfires and floods, including what has become known as the “Black Saturday” bushfires in 2009 in Victoria and severe flooding in coastal areas during the same month (Alston, 2010). These episodes have resulted in large-scale economic and social costs to Australian families and communities.

While much climate change debate has focused on the economic consequences for businesses and agricultural industries, more attention is needed on the social impact of climate change. Increases in temperature are known to cause an increase in deaths of some of the most vulnerable people in society, most notably babies and small children, elderly citizens, and people who suffer from existing health problems (Lam, 2007; McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006). Increases in domestic violence and other violent crimes have been associated with temperature rises (Anderson, 2001; Anderson, Anderson, Dore, DeNeve & Flanagan, 2000), and climate variability such as extended drought has already had a distinct effect on the mental health of communities in rural Australia (Anderson, 2009; Dean & Stain, 2010). A rise in sea levels is expected to dramatically increase the number of environmental refugees (IPCC, 2007), and a lack of basic needs such as food and water has been associated with uprisings and conflict between competing populations (Levy, Thorkelson,
Vorosmarty, Douglas, & Humphries 2006). Since, as a social justice consideration, Australian social workers are now required to promote “the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing” (AASW, 2010, p. 13), it is timely to begin research and discussion about ways that social workers can influence action and decision-making with pro-environmental outcomes.

Rural Women and Disadvantage in Australia

Women in Australia fare considerably worse than men on almost all socio-economic indicators, including income, health, and employment (Australian Human Rights Commission [AHRC], 2009; Department of Health and Ageing, 2008; Guggisberg, 2006; Stewart, Ashraf, & Munce, 2006; World Health Organization [WHO], 2000; Women’s Health Victoria, 2007, 2008). A report by the Australian Human Rights Commission (HREOC) revealed the serious consequences of the gender gap in Australia by highlighting the cumulative nature of gender inequality across the lifecycle. For example, average superannuation balances for women as a proportion of men’s decrease from 71.1% for women 25-34 years of age to 46.1% for women 60-64 years of age (AHRC, 2009). This highlights a significant bias that benefits men in the current policy approach to retirement and represents a poverty trap for women in later life.

Women in rural areas also have additional factors to contend with that further disadvantage their position. These factors relate to demographic issues, including isolation, lack of resources, and lack of access to services, as well as the cultural and social aspects specific to rural lifestyle. Lack of access to health care is a distinct disadvantage for women in rural areas. For example, there are very few specialist women’s health centres in rural areas and those that do exist are under resourced (Mason, 2008a, b). Medical specialists with expertise in women’s health are scarce in rural areas and this contributes to poor health outcomes for country women compared to their urban counterparts (Australian Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2005). Philips (2009) found that health and its outcomes become worse as remoteness increases, and are related to a lack of access, both physical and financial, to health services.

A most concerning issue in rural Australia is the unequal distribution of power between men and women, including the tradition of intergenerational property
inheritance and wealth to male children (Wendt & Cheers, 2004; Wendt & Hornosty, 2010). The high rate of rural men’s violence against women compared to urban populations is also concerning (Pease, 2010). Hogg and Carrington (2006) argued that violence against women in rural areas is invisible to the community and to policy-makers and contended that reporting of experiences of violence by women in rural areas is likely to be lower due to a variety of factors, including: lack of access to police and support services; ambivalence towards external interventions; a more conservative culture; and shared friendship networks between the police and male perpetrators. These social and cultural aspects of rural lifestyle exacerbate the inequalities experienced by rural women, and impede the opportunity for rural women to actively contribute to the climate change debate.

As a result of climate variability and significant structural changes to agriculture in general, the responsibilities of women have been expanded due to the increased social and economic hardships facing rural communities (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010; Alston & Kent, 2004, 2006; Stehlik, Gray, & Lawrence, 1999, 2000). The expectation for women’s involvement in voluntary work has increased, along with pressures to bridge the gap of declining access to much needed services, reduce the impact of higher levels of poverty, and attend to the increased level of health needs within the family and community (Alston, 2006, 2010; Stehlik et al., 1999). Women on farms are increasingly pursuing off-farm work to supplement farm incomes in addition to increasing farm labour roles whilst still maintaining existing responsibilities, which include financial management, educational support of children, and domestic related tasks (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Harvey, 2009).

This article explores the gendered nature of climate change in rural Australia by reporting on a qualitative study that involved interviewing rural women employed by women service providers and women who have been involved in the development of women’s services in a regional centre. The authors consider the risks posed to women if the development of social policy does not include a gendered analysis, and calls for the social work profession to respond to the emerging needs of rural women within the context of climate change. Given the range of factors impacting on rural women and their families and communities, it is evident that empirical information is needed to inform policy-makers of the experiences and needs of rural women as climate
change increasingly affects households. The article focuses on the views of women’s service providers and women’s services activists who have close connections with women from disadvantaged backgrounds and aims to investigate in what ways women are being impacted by climate change. A second aim is to explore possible policy approaches to address women’s experiences. This study is the initial phase of a larger planned study, with an upcoming second stage that will include a broader geographic region and larger participant numbers. The research questions are: (a) in what ways, if any, has climate change affected rural women?; and (b) what possible services or policy approaches, or both, might address the environmental impact upon women?

Methodology

A qualitative approach was employed for this study, which is considered appropriate when exploring issues that have limited or emerging knowledge, and undeveloped theory (Alston & Bowles, 2012). A qualitative approach enables the gathering of information that cannot be represented in quantitative or numerical form, such as sensitive information or descriptive dialogue. In particular, a qualitative approach is most appropriate when endeavouring to understand factors relevant to marginalised groups because the large numbers of participants required for quantitative research either cannot be obtained or the meanings attached to descriptions cannot be represented or encapsulated in quantitative research data. The study aims and methodology was approved by the ethics committee of the School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Charles Sturt University.

The Research Setting and Sample

The study took place in a regional centre of inland Australia. The regional centre has a geographical catchment area that includes approximately 100,000 people, and relies heavily on agricultural, manufacturing, and retail industries. Many surrounding rural villages, townships, and farming communities are serviced by the regional centre for health, business, employment, educational, and other consumer needs.

Seven women service providers and women activists were interviewed to explore their views about the impact of climate change on women in the community. Women service providers in the regional centre were contacted by letter, including an
information sheet explaining the research aims and methodology, and invited to participate in the study. Women activists were identified from their public profile in the community and contacted in a similar way. A follow-up phone call was made and individual interviews arranged. Four participants were employed by women’s service providers in the regional centre, and the remaining three were publicly known for their public role in the development of women’s services in the regional centre.

Data Collection and Analysis

Interviews were semi-structured and based on three main topics: personal views about the relationship between gender and climate change; perspectives of how climate change impacts on women with whom they have contact; and ideas for a more gender-inclusive approach to responding to the experiences of women. Interviews went for an average of one hour, were audio-taped, and later transcribed.

A process of thematic analysis occurred, which involved open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Ezzy, 2002). The process occurs with open exploration of the data followed by the development of categories based on common elements and differences between data (Ezzy, 2002). Open exploration of data occurred when transcribed interviews were analysed for recurrent topics. These topics were numbered and arranged into groups where central themes relating to the purposes of the study were identified. For example, comments relating to the belief that woman are more active in undertaking pro-environmental activities than men were recurrent, so these comments were allocated the same number and then positioned within a central theme that related to the aims of the study, in this case “implications of household roles”. Quotes that most represented common elements and differences were reported on as part of selective coding to magnify the voice of the women in the study.

The small number of participants interviewed limits any claim to representativeness of the findings for rural women in the chosen population, given that the population of rural women in the community was approximately half the overall population of 100,000 people. The large number of women in the area also encompassed a range of characteristics, including women living on farms, single
women, urban professionals, Aboriginal women, retired women, women with disabilities, women with refugee backgrounds, and other characteristics of diversity such as would be found in any large population. The women that the participants mostly spoke about were women living in poverty or crisis situations, thus providing a limited perspective of how climate change impacts a particularly marginalised group of women in the community. However, it should also be recognised that the most disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society are expected to be disproportionately affected by the impact of climate change.

Limitations of the study also include the fact that the participants interviewed were in privileged positions within the community, all in managerial or community representative positions, and therefore represented the views of a specific subset of the community. It could be said that this view neglects the reality that diverse rural women experience the world, and indeed the impact of climate change, in different ways. However, the participants in this case study spent much of their time with women from disadvantaged backgrounds through their employment and activist activities, so they were considered to be connected with women from a diverse range of cultural and socio-economic backgrounds. As a preliminary study, it was considered to be more effective and ethical to interview these women than to interview the women they work with, many of whom were in crisis situations. The small number of participants interviewed also raised issues of maintaining confidentiality within a relatively small regional area; therefore, information that might identify the participants was deliberately not recorded or used in the writing of follow-up reports.

Findings

Outcomes of the study highlighted several main themes, including: varied attitudes towards climate change; increased hardship for women; implications of household roles; women in crisis; organisational responsibilities; and gender-inclusive initiatives. The participants’ voices have been maintained as far as possible in the reporting of the findings, but names have been changed in order to respect their privacy.
Attitude towards Climate Change

Participants’ attitudes towards climate change were varied. Three of the seven participants revealed they were “believers” in climate change. These participants were actively engaged in conserving the environment through various activities, including their role as consumers and grass-roots activities with other women. The women expressed awareness about climate change issues and were mindful about their impact on the environment when making purchaser decisions. For example, they consciously supported local businesses, considered the producer-consumer chain when buying food, and expressed caution when choosing green electricity options. Gemma said, “It is a very revolutionary act, getting off the treadmill [of consumerism]”. The remaining four participants expressed some confusion about whether climate change was a real phenomenon. Although they accepted to some extent that current changes in the environment are unfolding, they expressed uncertainty about how these changes have come about. Participants referred to a lack of information to gauge an opinion, and to the earth as an evolving organism undergoing natural changes. Jane validated both sides of the climate change debate as having merit by saying, “You get to the point where one person can have this opinion and someone else has got the extreme opposite opinion, and so you’re just hearing so many different debates on extreme levels that you get to the point of [asking] what’s actually true”.

Increased Hardship for Women

Despite having mixed attitudes towards climate change in general, all participants appeared to accept that rural women were being impacted by extreme weather events. One participant referred to an increase in the number of domestic violence incidents and the severity of violence in the regional centre during recent floods. Some participants also referred to recent extreme weather events as having a direct impact on their own lives. For example, references were made to the impact of the drought and flood on their own family, friends, and community. One participant recently relocated her family from an outlying community due to the impact of the drought on her partner’s business. This participant also referred to a female work colleague who
arrived at work by 9:00am, after already having to undertake several hours of work on their family farm. Stacey said:

*Looking at what’s happened [here], the 10 years of drought ...then we’ve had the amount of flooding, a lot of crops were ruined, small businesses are finding it really difficult ...and I’ve even been talking to the rural communities in regards to the levels of depression that’s happening.*

Although an increase in the cost of living affects men and women, participants referred to the disadvantage this is having on rural women with limited access to finances. One participant referred to the “class differences” among women in the community and the difficulties that women from lower socio-economic backgrounds have in being able to afford to make pro-environmental decisions in order to withstand the impact of climate change. In particular, participants referred to increasing costs of electricity, fresh food, and petrol prices that cause considerable financial strain on women, especially women in crisis. One participant related the increase in living costs to making it even more difficult for women to leave domestic violence situations. Angie commented on the situation by saying:

*[regarding higher prices] I honestly don’t know how a woman does it, that’s a single parent, you know, three or four kids at school, getting the pension coming in, and paying rent, I can’t see how they’re going to survive, and that’s now, it’s going to get worse.*

**Implications of Household Roles**

Participants identified the household role of rural women as a fundamental difference between men and women in the community. Women were identified as the purchasers and preparers of food and as making the day-to-day decisions about how the household runs, particularly with regard to household purchases and care of children. One participant expressed the belief that women are usually blamed if the household falls behind in paying the bills because women are usually responsible for making ends meet. Another participant expressed concern that women might be blamed for increasing electricity bills when the price rise is in fact caused by external factors rather than individual deficiencies. As a result of women’s role in the
household, participants expressed a general belief that women are more conscious of the environment and more active in undertaking pro-environmental activities. For example, multitasking when driving into town for errands, engaging in backyard activities that conserve the environment, taking time to read labels in supermarkets, and using environmental carry bags rather than plastic bags when shopping were identified as key initiatives undertaken by women. Also, the desire to gain more value for the dollar to value-add to their activities was seen as significant, such as using a bokashi [composting] bucket, and having a backyard vegetable garden. Louise stated, “I think women at work, and I think I’d include our home in that, because a lot of women work at home ...we’re great recyclers and we’re conscious of climate change and getting the best value for your dollar at home”.

Participants also expressed concern for women as targets for industry and consumerism. For example, advertising directed towards women involving personal grooming, fashion, and household cleaning products, presents lifestyle images that may be in direct contrast with pro-environmental choices.

Women in Crisis

Despite women’s role in the home, participants employed by women service providers expressed the view that most women in crisis due to homelessness and domestic violence do not have a significant role in controlling or managing household resources. In particular, the participants referred to women in domestic violence situations as usually being controlled by men and therefore having limited access to money and purchase decisions. One participant described this situation as a “man’s home is still his castle”. These participants referred to the psychological and emotional damage caused by domestic violence that diminishes women’s self-esteem and confidence to make pro-environmental decisions. Efforts towards daily survival limit such women’s capacity to engage in pro-environmental activities. Renee described this situation:

A lot of the women that we see are only given a small amount of money per week to buy the basics, so even their clothes are chosen for them and so they’re not making choices about what’s affecting climate change, which is a step beyond even choosing for them-selves.
Organisational Responsibilities

The participants employed by women service providers recognised their role in providing women with environmental information and energy efficient utilities to assist with increases in living costs. However, a lack of organisational resources in the form of employee awareness, time, and funding were specifically identified by participants as preventing this from happening. In the context of recent New South Wales government funding cuts to services, the ability to do this was believed to be even further diminished than it has been in the past. Additionally, the participants highlighted that energy efficient utilities usually cost more than inefficient utilities, making it difficult to assist vulnerable women to adapt and become more resilient to increasing electricity prices. Renee described the following, “we haven’t got the resources ...and even having this conversation has made me more aware to look at what we’re providing ...we just go along with whatever’s provided ...and we don’t look at the specifics about the cost of running equipment”.

Gender-inclusive Initiatives

Participants identified an abundance of policy initiative ideas for enhancing a more gender-inclusive approach to climate change. These initiatives related to three main ideas: networking and grass-roots activity; empowerment of women through increased awareness; and responsibilities of private and public enterprises. Participants emphasised the importance of conversation and informal networks with other like-minded women. Contact with friends, family, work colleagues, and neighbours create opportunities for meaningful relationships and the chance to share and learn about environmental living from each other through meetings, backyard gardening, and other communication channels such as social networking. The idea of a community and grass-roots activity at this local level was acknowledged as being a powerful tool for women. Additionally, technological methods of communication, such as online forums and social networking were viewed as integral to promoting communication between women. Louise stated, “women seem to be wanting connection with other women, more than I’ve seen for a long time” and “we need to be able to give it [women’s networking] a voice somehow”.

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Participants in the study were also aware of current government activity regarding climate change policy, and expressed their concern about a lack of political will of Australian governments to address environmental issues collaboratively. Participants expressed frustration about the confusion caused by opposing views of political parties regarding climate change, and a lack of government leadership about addressing environmental issues. They expressed their belief that the government has a responsibility to provide for the basic needs of women in crisis, such as housing, finances, employment, and education, so that women are able to participate in making pro-environmental decisions. The participants also referred to supermarkets and big business as major players who have a social responsibility towards vulnerable groups, including women in crisis.

Participants highlighted a lack of available information for women and men about climate change, and expressed the view that information for women needs to be presented in a meaningful way, detailing what climate change is, how it affects women, and how making the right choices can assist them. Participants believed that meaningful information relevant to women would be most successfully received through multiple sources, such as conversation, experiential activities such as gardening and food sharing, technology, television, community forums, pamphlets, and school education. Glenda said, “[climate change] is linked so critically to women’s...wellbeing and their life ...so I think if there was more awareness about it then that’s one very important element that can provide empowerment to women”.

Discussion

This study, for the first time, brings together social policy concerns for rural populations with gender-specific research data on affected women’s services to inform social workers of new code of ethics environmental imperatives. Research outcomes indicate that climate change has had some effect on rural women in the regional centre where the study took place. Participants identified that recent variations in climate, such as drought and floods, had increased hardship through increased domestic violence incidents, business decline, increase in living costs, and an increase in workloads for women. Findings from the study also suggest that the experience of extreme disadvantage, such as domestic violence and homelessness increases
women’s vulnerability to climate change, and in particular impedes choice and opportunities to better adapt to the impact of climate change. The day-to-day focus on survival for women in these situations was perceived by participants in this study to preclude many women from engaging in pro-environmental activities. At this extreme level of disadvantage women may have fundamental rights of choice and opportunity removed, and may function at the discretion of partners who control their livelihood. These factors make rural women in crisis particularly vulnerable to the effects of climate change as rural women already have to contend with the highly patriarchal nature of rural lifestyle.

Women’s primary role in the household has implications for the allocation of responsibility for the impact of climate change. Many policies proposed by Australian governments have concentrated on changing consumer behaviours and have lacked a systemic approach to climate change. This approach has impacted upon household practices and costs, such as increasing water rates and the installation of water saving devices, energy efficient light globes, and use of grey water. Women, who generally maintain primary responsibility for household tasks and family caring roles, are disproportionately impacted upon by this individualistic approach. While influencing changes in consumer behaviour is one proposed avenue for addressing climate change, when considered alone it fails to recognise that those who consume most of the resources responsible for causing climate change are the larger industries predominantly owned and controlled by men (Alston & Mason, 2008; Smith, 2010). Social workers, who work at the micro, meso, and macro levels of practice, are in a unique position to recognise this structural inequality and to undertake initiatives associated with the development of climate change policy to redress this imbalance. Women also have limited access to the organisations and boards responsible for making decisions about the allocation of resources, and lack representation on relevant government and industry bodies (Alston, 2003; Alston & Wilkinson, 1998; Sheridan, Pini, & Conway, 2006). According to the Global Gender Gap Report, Australia ranked 39th out of 134 countries for political empowerment of women (Hausmann, Tyson, & Zahidi, 2010). This is reflected in figures that revealed that women represented only 29.6% of elected positions in the Australian Commonwealth Parliament (Politics and Public Administration Group, 2011), and just 2.5% of board
chair positions in the top 200 companies listed on the Australian Stock Exchange (Equal Opportunity for Women in the Workplace Agency [EOWWA], 2010). Therefore, women have limited influence on the development of climate change policy. Social workers have a role to play in ensuring that rural women are included in public aspects of rural lifestyle, such as membership on local councils, Landcare groups, fire prevention planning, business initiatives, and other local groups. The inclusion of rural women in the public domain is crucial to bringing the needs of rural women to the forefront of climate change decision making and policy development.

Social workers have a responsibility to promote sustainable practice and to ensure their employing welfare organisations develop sustainable policies. Participants in the study recognised this role with reference to providing environmentally-friendly services and support to women, including utilities that promote sustainability. Given the additional costs this can involve, a significant barrier to the provision of environmentally-friendly services and support is a lack of resources and a reluctance of governments to fund welfare initiatives. Nevertheless, AASW’s Code of Ethics (AASW, 2010) requires that social workers promote the protection of the natural environment as part of their commitment to social justice. This means that social workers have an ethical responsibility to undertake sustainable practice and to create change within their employing organisations. Additionally, it seems rational that welfare services provided to support women are responsive to the specific needs of women adapting to the impacts of climate change and there is therefore an onus on services and welfare support to be sustainable, culturally appropriate, and gender sensitive.

Data from the study show that women can benefit from activities that promote collective action. The importance of informal networks and conversation with other women, as indicated by participants in the study, is integral to undertaking pro-environmental activities. This suggests that a community-based approach could form the basis of collective action for rural women. Social workers may find it useful to further explore community activities such as community gardens, food sharing co-op’s, and Local Energy Transfer System (LETS) for their relevance to practice. Other strategies for social work practice could involve moves to ensure private enterprises bear the responsibility for making pro-environmental choices. For example,
lives would be made much easier by an underpinning regulatory regime that ensures items on the supermarket shelf are safe for the environment.

Recognising the diversity of Australian women and the differences between rural and urban women will help identify the challenges relating to specific aspects of rural lifestyle. In particular, the social impact of climate change is likely to disadvantage rural women significantly and will require distinct approaches for addressing these inequalities. Social workers have a responsibility to respond to the needs of rural women as they adapt to the impact of climate change, which is a social justice imperative outlined in the AASW Code of Ethics.

Conclusion

This research draws attention to the social implications for rural women adapting to climate change. The research is timely in that rural Australia has been grappling with increases in weather variability that has caused serious damage to rural communities. Regardless of where one might be positioned in the climate change debate, few would argue about the devastating impact of recent drought, floods, and bushfires. This study revealed the rural dimension of climate change by gaining the perspectives of seven women who were intricately involved in women’s issues in a regional centre.

Despite the small scale of the study, the data provide some early understanding to inform further research involving gender and climate change in rural Australia. While the primary role of women in the household enables rural women the capacity to influence the environment through pro-environmental activities, it also potentially places women at risk of being excluded from the public domain of climate change debate. Rural women in crisis face a double disadvantage involving the patriarchal nature of rural lifestyle plus extreme situations involving poverty, domestic violence, and homelessness. This situation increases women’s vulnerability to climate change impact, particularly with regard to impeding choice and opportunity for better adaptation to climate change.

The impact of climate change is expected to have devastating effects on people all over the globe, particularly disadvantaged groups. It is the responsibility of people in positions of influence, including governments, human service workers and social
workers, scientists, and private enterprise to alleviate the burden of climate change impact on marginalised groups. At a time when social workers are dealing with newfound responsibilities for protecting the environment, this study highlights significant issues relevant to gender and climate change in rural Australia.

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Publication 6: Gender and climate change in Australia: A review of differences

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Abstract

This paper outlines the results of a literature review exploring the relationship between gender and climate change in rural Australia. Whilst the climate change debate in Australia has largely focused on environmental and economic implications, little attention has been given to the social implications of climate change. The focus of this study is on the climate change impacts on Australian rural women and men, with particular emphasis on the disadvantage experienced by rural women. A key finding in the review was that rural women and men adapt to climatic events, such as, drought and water shortages, in different ways. Outcomes of the review also highlight the dearth of Australian research that focuses on rural women and climate change. We contend that social workers have an ethical responsibility to be aware of the impact of climate change on disadvantaged groups, such as, rural women. The fact that gender equality has been largely ignored in the Australian climate change debate points to a need for social work involvement in climate change advocacy, research, and policy development, in an effort to redress the imbalance.

*Keywords:* gender, rural, climate change

Introduction

As the world grapples with issues associated with climate change, social work too has begun to engage with this emerging field of practice. In Australia, recent changes to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010) code of ethics now requires social workers to actively promote a healthy ‘natural’ environment as part of their commitment to social justice (p. 13). Although implications for practice are still being articulated, this means Australian social workers have an ethical responsibility to
undertake sustainable practice and to create change for the inherent social wellbeing of society.

This paper draws attention to the relationship between gender and climate change in rural Australia, and in particular to the disadvantage experienced by rural women. The social implications for rural women adapting to climate change in the context of recent severe drought and associated water shortages is concerning. Given the lack of attention to the gendered implications of climate change, this paper reviews Australian literature in an attempt to organise and summarise pertinent issues, especially those relevant to social workers in practice and in policy development.

**Climate Change**

Global warming refers to an increase in greenhouse emissions that is causing an unprecedented rise in temperature trends (Garnaut, 2008; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2007). Recent research has confirmed an anthropogenic basis for at least part of the increase in greenhouse gases over the past 150 years, concomitant with the commencement of the industrial revolution (Garnaut, 2008; IPCC, 2007). Human activities that were initially well intentioned, such as, deforestation and mining, are the main contributors to an increase in greenhouse gas emissions. Population growth coupled with high levels of energy consumption and a global reliance on economic growth for prosperity has also exacerbated climate change. Scientists and environmentalists are warning governments about current impacts and impending consequences for the world if the rise in greenhouse gas emissions is not mitigated (IPPC, 2007).

Whilst linking any one particular climatic event with climate change is not scientifically sound, an overall trend indicates that extreme weather events are increasing in frequency and intensity across the world due to climate change impacts (IPCC, 2007). In Australia recent extreme weather events, such as, drought, bushfires and floods have been viewed by some climatologists as being undoubtedly linked to climate change (Climate Commission, 2013; Garnaut, 2008, Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) & Australian Bureau of Meteorology, 2007). At the beginning of the century, widespread drought crippled much of the
country for almost a decade, causing severe water shortages and decline in food production (Alston, 2006, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004). In 2009 the state of Victoria experienced devastating bushfires known as ‘Black Saturday’. At the same time the state of Queensland experienced severe flooding known as the ‘Queensland Big Wet’. Outcomes for both climatic events have included loss of life and large scale social and economic costs for communities, including reduced incomes, poverty, and an increase in health and welfare concerns (Alston, 2010a).

Many other social impacts of climate change have been identified internationally. For example, an increase is expected in death rates of vulnerable groups, such as, babies, older people, and people who suffer from existing health conditions due to rising temperatures and heat waves (Lam, 2007; McMichael, Woodruff, & Hales, 2006). Increases in domestic violence and other violent crimes have also been associated with temperature rises (Anderson, 2001; Anderson, Anderson, Dore, DeNeve, & Flanagan, 2000), and climate variability related events, such as, extended drought have already had a distinct effect on the mental health of rural communities in Australia (Anderson, 2009; Dean & Stain, 2010). Lack of water and food shortages have been associated with conflict between competing groups (Levy, Thorkelson, Vorosmarty, Douglas & Humphries, 2006) and a rise in sea levels due to climate change is impacting on the survival of whole communities and is expected to vastly increase the number of environmental refugees seeking a safe and stable place to live (Besthorn & Meyer, 2010; IPCC, 2007).

The Australian Rural Context

People living in rural Australia are significantly disadvantaged on almost all socio-economic indices compared to their metropolitan counterparts. In general, rural Australians experience poorer health and have higher mortality rates, lower life expectancy, and suffer from higher rates of chronic health conditions (Alston, 2010b; AIHW, 2006). Rural Australians also experience lower levels of education, higher rates of unemployment, lower income levels, and poorer housing than people living in metropolitan areas (Alston, 2010b; Cheers, Darracott, & Lonne, 2007; Cheers & Taylor, 2005). In addition, a large study that considered the geographical distribution of social disadvantage across Australia in 2004 found that rural areas were overrepresented on
social disadvantage measures in the two jurisdictions with the highest populations (Vinson, 2007). Across New South Wales and Victoria, 31 out of the top 40 most disadvantaged areas were rural communities (Vinson, 2007, p. 30, 34).

Rural Australia has also experienced significant structural and social change over the last few decades. Cheers, Darracott, and Lonne (2007) identify a series of factors, including globalisation, financial market deregulation, technological advances, demographical changes, and economic restructuring as main contributors to rural decline in Australia. Agricultural industries have seen a steady decline, with agricultural exports declining from over two-thirds of total exports in the 1960s to just over one-fifth in 2003-04 (Productivity Commission, 2005). Agriculture’s contribution to gross domestic product fell from 14% in the 1960s to 6% in the 1980s, and employment in the agriculture sector has almost halved since the same period to a little over 4% (Productivity Commission, 2005). Over time the withdrawal of services, such as banking institutions, government services, and private businesses, has been linked with high rates of unemployment, and poverty in rural areas (Cheers et al., 2007; Cheers & Taylor, 2005).

**Gender Disadvantage in Australia**

Gender disadvantage in Australia is evident on almost all socio-economic indicators, with women fairing considerably worse than their male counterparts. A report by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC, 2009) revealed the serious consequences of the gender gap in Australia by highlighting the cumulative nature of gender inequality across the lifecycle. For example, average superannuation balances for women as a proportion of men’s decrease from 71.1% for women 25-34 years of age to 46.1% for women 60-64 years of age (AHRC, 2009, p. 6). This highlights a significant bias that benefits men in the current policy approach to retirement and represents a poverty trap for women in later life.

Not surprisingly then, disparity in income earnings also exist between Australian men and women for average weekly earnings with women earning an average weekly income of $818.50, while the average weekly earnings for men is $1,281.00 (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2012). This represents a difference of over $460 each week in favour of men. Women also represent a much greater proportion than
men in the lowest income groups, which is a pattern reversed for highest income
groups, where men represent the greater proportion. According to the Australian
Bureau of Statistics (ABS), women represent 20% of the population within the lowest
income group compared to 15% of men (2008). For the highest income group, men
represent 29% whereas women represent just 11% (ABS, 2008). These figures reveal
the gendered nature of income earnings in Australia and highlight the disadvantage
that exists for women in paid employment.

A further factor affecting Australian women is gender-based violence, including
child sexual assault, workplace harassment, adult sexual assault, and domestic
violence. According to a report produced under the auspices of the Australian Institute
of Family Studies (Lamont, 2011) comparing national child protection figures, girls
under the age of 18 years were more likely than boys to experience confirmed cases of
sexual assault during 2009-2010. Statistics for three out of seven Australian
jurisdictions revealed that girls were three times more likely than boys to experience
confirmed cases of sexual assault (Lamont, 2011). Further to this, a study exploring the
extent of sexual harassment in the workplace found that one in three women between
the ages of 18 and 64 years experienced sexual harassment in their lifetime (AHRC,
2008). Additionally, in 2005, 17% of women over the age of 18 years experienced
domestic violence by a partner at some stage in their life since they were 15 years of
age (ABS, 2007). These statistics cause concern for the overall safety of women
throughout their lifecycle, and highlight an imbalance of power between Australian
men and women.

Women also experience legal barriers that inhibit gender equality. Among five
recommendations made by the Australian Human Rights Commission (AHRC, 2010) in
its 2010 Gender Equality Blueprint, emphasis was given to the need to improve
legislation that relates to gender equality. The report highlights the inadequacy of the
Australian Sex Discrimination Act 1984 in addressing systemic discrimination, and its
failure to meet international legal obligations, such as, the Convention on all Forms of
Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The AHRC (2010) report also makes
reference to the need for change to the Australian Equal Opportunity for Women in the
Workplace Act 1999 (EOWW), which is critical to addressing the inequality experienced
by women in Australian workplaces, including income levels, sexual harassment, women’s management, and discrimination.

These disparities reveal disturbing inequalities between women and men, and point to an urgent need for these imbalances to be redressed. Social justice, involving principles of equality and human rights, requires understanding of the implications of a gendered approach to policy development in order to achieve social and economic egalitarianism for women. The social work profession is committed to social justice and human rights and therefore has an imperative to advocate for the equality of women through direct practice initiatives, advocacy for policy development, and social action.

**Double Disadvantage: Women and Rurality**

Women residing in rural Australia often encounter significant inequality due to factors relating to their geographical location and subsequent issues of isolation, lack of resources, and lack of access to services. According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW, 2005), medical specialists are in short supply in rural areas, which contributes to poor health outcomes for rural women compared to urban women. Research by Mason (2008a, 2008b) that interviewed representatives of 74 rural women’s services across Australia explored the challenges faced by service workers in meeting the needs of rural women. Outcomes of the study identified key issues affecting rural women such as: a lack of resources, lack of transport, limited access, privacy and safety, confidentiality, lack of funding, and lack of outreach services. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2004) found that Australian rural women have lower labour force participation rates, are more likely to be working part-time, and have lower educational qualifications than urban women. Rural women also face additional challenges in finding employment due to limited employment opportunities.

However, the disadvantage experienced by Australian rural women extends beyond demographical and geographical factors to include cultural and social aspects specific to rural lifestyle. Rurality in Australia is typically dominated by white men, who most often hold power through ownership of resources (Alston, 2010b). Pease (2010) emphasises the complexity of the social and cultural context of rural lifestyle and refers to several factors that disadvantage rural women, including: a more
conservative social and political ideology, valuing of privacy for family issues, ambivalence towards outside intervention, a high profile of mateship among men, and more conservative perspectives on the role of women in the family. Similarly, a study conducted by Wendt and Cheers (2004) explored dominant discourses of rural lifestyle and identified religious values, the importance of family name and status, intergenerational property inheritance and wealth, importance of self-reliance, and impacts of cultural heritage as factors that impact on women. Hogg and Carrington (2006) also discussed the patriarchal structures that exist in rural areas and believed such structures are much stronger in rural areas than in urban areas. These traditional discourses of rural lifestyle are embedded in the social construction of rural life, and shape the distribution of power and biases towards rural men.

**Review Process**

A review of existing Australian literature relating to gender and climate change was sourced from journal articles, government and departmental reports, and welfare association reports. Search terms were used to identify relevant literature from journal databases and the internet, and included any combination of the following keywords: gender, women, female, and climate change, environment, rural, remote, and regional. A total of nine sources (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004, 2006; Alston & Mason, 2008a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik, Gray, & Lawrence, 1999, 2000) were identified as specifically relating to the gendered nature of climate change in Australia, and consequently used for the purposes of this research. Four of these sources were research reports, and the remaining five were journal articles. Of the five journal articles, four analysed data from the original four research reports, therefore five of the nine sources consisted of original research (four research reports plus one journal article).

**Analysis**

A thematic process of analysis was used to identify themes in the data gathered from the source literature. Ezzy (2002, p. 93) refers to the process of thematic analysis as including open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This process begins with open exploration of data, the development of categories and codes for those categories, and the identification of a central theme that links the data to emergent
theory. Open exploration of data occurred as part of this literature review when trying to locate relevant documents, for example, by using broad search terms in relevant data bases. The categories and codes were developed when commonalities and differences were found between the documents.

**Limitations**

Several issues are associated with the analysis of secondary or existing data for research, including contextual issues, validity, and timeliness (Alston & Bowles, 2012; Stewart & Kamins, 1993). Difficulties associated with analysing documents that are written for some other purpose include possible predisposition of the researcher to being unintentionally influenced when using data for purposes that do not parallel with the original intent of the report. The information obtained can therefore be inaccurate or invalid when applied to the alternative research purpose (Stewart & Kamins, 1993). To overcome this issue the researchers made every effort to honestly represent the work of other authors. Additionally, analysis processes used in qualitative research were systematic and involved accurate coding and constant re-checking in order to validate data.

Information prepared and gathered for reports usually have some specific intent, for example, to further the interests of a particular group. The contextual circumstances of the report, for example, the original audience for which the report was prepared, can therefore undermine the accuracy of data presented (Stewart & Kamins, 1993). These issues were taken into account in this study through the application of critical theory as part of the analysis process. Critical theory questions traditional ideology and provides alternative explanations for social issues through the examination of unequal power relationships (Fook, 2012; Healy, 2005; Payne, 2005). This approach encourages consideration of the structural issues and political nature of the reports in question, as well as the domination of powerful groups that might exist in the context of each document (Fook, 2012).

Another limitation to using secondary sources for research is the timeliness of the literature. That is, how old the literature is or how out-dated and therefore irrelevant the literature is at the time of analysis (Alston & Bowles, 2012). However, given the research topic is a recent phenomenon in social work practice, all documents
considered were relevant and have been part of recent international debate and discussion.

An important ethical issue for conducting a literature review is ensuring the honest representation of the authored documents, so that data is not used inappropriately or for purposes that conflict with initial intent of the specific document. This means that documents were analysed carefully, for example, the analysis of smaller subsets of much larger documents were considered in the context of overall conclusions.

**Findings**

Given Australia’s recent experience of drought in the earliest part of the 21st century and in the 1990’s, the review literature predominantly focused on the social impacts of drought in Australia. Of the nine review papers, eight specifically considered the effects of droughts. The exception source paper considered the gender composition of water boards and the lack of social value versus economic value placed on water as a commodity.

A key finding in the review literature was that rural women and men adapt to climatic events, such as, drought and water shortages, in different ways (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004, 2006; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). The highly gendered response to climate variability primarily involved negative consequences for both women and men.

**Increase in Workloads**

During drought and water shortages the review literature revealed that rural women are more likely to have increased workloads on farms, for example, assisting with stock feeding and water carting (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). These extra tasks arise out of need for stock survival, and the woman’s partner who is often primarily responsible for stock feeding cannot fulfil the task without assistance due to stock numbers and the intensity of the work involved.
Concomitantly, women are also more likely to obtain off-farm employment to obtain the cash flow needed to cover household expenses (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). During drought the quality of stock and crops fall along with commodity prices, and farm business income is often low or running at a loss. The off-farm work provided by women essentially enables the family to remain on the farm during the drought period. Alston and Kent (2004) conducted 120 interviews across three communities, and reported that 75% of women increased their work on the farm during drought and 50% of women had gained off-farm work for much needed income. Such off-farm employment is usually forced by circumstances, in that the women would not normally be seeking off-farm employment (Alston, 2007; Alston & Kent, 2004). Off-farm work often results in involuntary separation from the family due to relocation for employment (Alston, 2007; Alston & Kent, 2004).

In addition, off-farm employment often provides relatively insecure conditions, including part-time and casual work (Alston, 2007; Alston & Kent, 2004). Annual leave and holidays are usually taken during peak labour times on the farm, such as, harvest time and sheep shearing seasons, thus, allowing women to provide much-needed labour on the farm (Alston, 2010a). These somewhat excessive work conditions can cause significant impact on child-care arrangements and strain on family relationships (Alston, 2007). For women who do not obtain off-farm employment, reduced contact with other women often occurs due to the out-migration of local women in search of off-farm employment.

The review literature also identified that women are also more likely to work up to an advanced age during drought in order to assist with increased workloads on farms (Alston, 2010a). Older women who might normally be retiring from physical farm labour find themselves having to assist with the increase in farm workload to ensure the farm is kept operating. Whilst on the one hand this phenomenon demonstrates the qualities of a strong family community who ‘pull together when things get tough’; it also highlights a stretched community that is forced to draw from a particularly vulnerable group of older women.
The review literature identified that during drought and water shortages men are more likely to experience an increase in workload on the farm, for example, carting water, feeding stock, and general maintenance during drought periods (Alston, 2006, 2007; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik et al., 2000). This increase in workload greatly reduces time allowed for social interaction, whether with the family or wider farming community. This increase in workload inevitably reduces family cohesion and community networks, and causes social isolation for rural men (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a).

**Negative Health Impacts**

The review literature identified that women on farms are more likely to become the protectors of their male partner’s health (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). Women tend to be aware of the strain their male partners are experiencing and undertake the carer role, for example, through ongoing emotional support, encouragement to socialise, and as one report identified by reducing exposure to negative media by turning the radio or television off (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). As a result of this, women tend to ignore their own health in order to care for that of their family’s health (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008).

One report identified the profound long-term effect on women who live through drought for extended periods, as undertaking community carer roles (Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). Women often bear the burden of having to rebuild communities after losing community resources, skills, and relationships from families and services that have left. Alston (2010a) recognised this community work role along with other increased areas of work as preventing women from being able to tend to their own health needs.

Women also experience grief and loss over the dying landscape, especially their gardens which were identified in the review literature as being symbolic of health and growth (Alston, 2007; Alston & Kent, 2004; Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). For many farm women, gardens provide spiritual meaning (Alston, 2006; Alston & Kent, 2004; Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000), and their loss comes at a great emotional cost.
Men experience grief and loss over the death of livestock and farm land, and the loss of their farming lifestyle. Daily exposure to death and a grim landscape provides a somewhat discouraging context for work, coupled with a fear of an unknown future career in farming (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). Given the length of recent drought in Australia as enduring for approximately 10 years in some parts of the country, this is a considerable length of time for men to be confronted with ongoing stress, which to some extent is out of their control (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008).

The review literature also identified that men feel blamed by the community view that farmers are somehow responsible for climate problems (Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). This feeling of being demonised by the community coupled with the threat to their future farming careers seriously threatens men’s identity and masculinities as farmers (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). Men also experience increased isolation and loneliness, with the effect of many men withdrawing from social activities (Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). As a result, men were also identified as being at increased risk of developing mental health issues, including depression and suicide (Alston, 2010a; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008).

A Focus on Economics and Environment

Specific reference was made to the re-conceptualisation of water as a commodity involving the buying and selling of water allocations (Alston & Mason, 2008b). This places an economic worth on a natural resource, which has significant impact on the way water is perceived and valued. Changes in government perspectives of drought have also been altered from one of ‘natural disaster’ to ‘business risk’ (Stehlik et al., 1999). This has reduced the responsibility of governments to provide immediate financial relief as would occur for other natural disasters, such as, fire and floods, and harnesses a model of self-reliance and risk management where farmers are accountable for their own losses. Researchers highlighted their concerns that a sole focus on economic analysis and implications of climate change neglects the human factor relevant to climate change, including the social ramifications for rural families (Alston, 2007; Alston & Mason, 2008a). In particular, Alston and Mason (2008a) consider that a focus on the economic value of water excludes women from providing
a more balanced view on the value of water. Women’s strong links with community life make them more able to articulate the enhanced social interactions and sense of community that water provides through a range of family, leisure and sporting activities.

**Decision Making**

Decision making featured in the review literature as being a point of difference between men and women during climate variability. Relevant issues involved: the dominance of men holding positions on boards, men being the main decision makers in their relationship with farm women, and conversely, farming men losing political power to governments and corporations.

One particular study by Alston and Mason (2008a) identified that there is a distinct dominance of men holding positions on relevant climate change and agricultural boards, and in leadership positions. This dominance of men has served to marginalise rural women from relevant debate and decision-making processes. Alston and Mason (2008a) examined the gender composition of water boards in the Murray-Darling Basin and found that women take up less than 30 per cent of positions. The researchers argue that this provides a skewed perspective of the meaning of water, neglects to recognise the varied experiences of women and men, and fails to carry the complete repertoire of issues to the water debate.

However, farming men were also identified in the review literature as having lost political power due to other key players, such as, governments and corporations, dominating food and water security policies (Alston, 2010a). As a result, farming men have limited input into the development of agriculture and their futures, which has reduced their control and added significantly to their health and welfare needs (Alston, 2010a). Nevertheless, despite the increasing politicisation and corporatisation of issues involving the environment and consequential reduced involvement of farming men, women remain under-represented at all levels of decision-making processes (Alston & Mason 2008a).

Another study examined women and decision making, and concluded that women do not perceive themselves as dominant decision makers in their relationship
with farming men (Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). Out of 21 women respondents none identified themselves as having made an important farm decision alone and none reported having taken a lead in the discussion preceding the decision being made; eighteen women reported being partly involved and three reported not being involved in the decision making at all. Alternatively, of the farm men partnering these women, 12 reported having made the decision or taking a lead in the discussion preceding the decision being made. The remaining nine reported being partly involved in the decision making (Stehlik et al., 1999, 2000). These outcomes reflect the patriarchal make-up of rural lifestyle, and indicate the comparative lack of power that women experience.

**Points of Commonality**

Whilst the literature mostly highlights the gendered differences in response to climate variability, there are some points of commonality worth mentioning. In general, the farm family experiences a significant increase in stress and health issues due to the strains from changed roles placed on family members (Alston, 2006, 2007, 2010a; Alston & Kent, 2004, 2006; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008; Stehlik et al., 1999). This can result in relationship issues and conflict within the family unit. A reduction in income increases farm debt and poverty, resulting in family members sacrificing leisure and other items they might normally purchase, such as, holidays and paid farm labour used during peak seasons (Alston & Kent, 2006; Alston & Witney-Soanes, 2008). In particular, reduced access to education opportunities for children is identified as being of major concern for both farm men and women (Alston & Kent, 2004, 2006; Stehlik et al., 1999).

The impact of drought on children was also identified as a common issue of concern for farm women and men. Alston and Kent (2004) highlighted the impact of drought on children as being under-reported and involving: an increase in farm work, increase in stress, social isolation, and lack of access to education (as mentioned). Likewise, Alston and Witney-Soanes (2008) refer to: increased anxiety, altered behaviour at school, reduced educational opportunities, withdrawing behaviours, and an increase in farm work. A later study by Alston and Kent (2006) identified issues experienced by children as involving: an awareness of reducing water use, increase in farm work, exposure to dying animals and landscape, an increase in off-farm work to
pay for farm expenses as well as their own expenses, reduced access to education, and reduced participation in leisure activities and school excursions.

**Discussion**

The literature reviewed in this paper provides compelling evidence of the gendered nature of responses to climatic events in rural Australia. Whilst it is not scientifically rigorous to attribute single climatic events to climate change, evidence is mounting that the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events across the world are indicative of climate change impacts (IPCC, 2007). Further to this trend, some climatologists in Australia have viewed recent drought, bushfire, and flood events as being associated with the impacts of climate change (Climate Commission, 2013; CSIRO & Australian Bureau of Meteorology, 2007; Garnaut, 2008). Given that the outcomes of these weather events have included large scale social and economic costs for families and communities, loss of life, loss of livelihood, and increased health and welfare issues, the role of social work in the emerging field of environmental or ‘green’ social work is becoming more relevant to the profession. In addition, changes to the 2010 version of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) code of ethics now requires social workers to be active in the pursuit of a healthy ‘natural’ environment (p. 13). Social workers therefore have an ethical responsibility to promote social wellbeing through the development of sustainable policy and practice.

The literature review indicated that the response to climatic events, such as, drought and water shortages, has involved negative adaptations for both men and women in rural Australia, which undoubtedly causes significant strain on families and communities. Given the different experiences of rural men and women, it seems rational that the services provided to support rural families need to be responsive to these differences. This means there is an onus on services and welfare support to be affordable, culturally appropriate, and gender sensitive. Without knowledge of gender differences, services will be rurally inappropriate and under-accessed despite the growing need for support.

It must also be considered that rural women are adapting to climatic events in a social context that favours men. The patriarchal flavouring of rural communities
means that women are challenged by double disadvantage, increasing women’s vulnerability to adverse outcomes of climatic events. Recognition of the gendered adaptations rural women experience during major climatic events is required from proponents in the climate change arena; including government, lead decision making bodies, and welfare groups. However, women have limited access to the organisations and boards responsible for making decisions about the allocation of resources, and lack representation on relevant government and industry bodies, and this often serves to omit the views and perceptions of women in important decision-making processes (Alston, 2003; Alston & Wilkinson, 1998; Sheridan, Pini, & Conway, 2006). It is therefore of paramount importance that rural women are included in the climate change debate and decision-making process to ensure that women’s perspectives and issues are represented and addressed at all levels of policy development.

Post-structural feminist theory provides a framework that highlights the unique experiences of Australian rural women adapting to climate change impacts. This anti-essentialist perspective draws on ideas from Butler and Scott (1992) who explored the deleterious implications of assuming that all women share the same identity and experience. Whilst recognition of diversity amongst women can be criticised for weakening the political effectiveness of feminism, it also challenges dominant ideas within feminism that serve to conceal important differences amongst women, leaving significant disadvantage for particular sub-groups of women (Jones, 2003). Despite the fact that Australian women in general share many common points of disadvantage relating to income, health, and employment, women in rural areas identify with different challenges relating to aspects specific to rural lifestyle. In particular, the social impacts of climate change disadvantage rural women significantly and require distinct approaches for addressing these inequalities.

For men, the dominant masculine discourse that typically consists of strength, ruggedness, and stoicism serves to seriously disadvantage rural men in the face of adversity, such as drought. Connelly (1995) refers to this hegemonic position of men as being a system of behaviours that presupposes men’s concerns above that of women’s, and enables men the ability to control women even at the family level. In a rural context decision making, land ownership, public dominance and the holding of leadership positions are key factors that contribute to the subordination of rural
women (Alston, 2010b). While in good times this hegemonic position provides men with power, privilege, and prosperity, in difficult times it serves to restrain them from seeking assistance, which makes men particularly vulnerable to negative health outcomes, such as mental health problems. It is argued that a focus on deconstructing masculine hegemony, rather than dealing directly with health outcomes, will provide a more effective solution to men’s declining health in the face of climate change impacts (Alston, 2012; Alston & Kent, 2008).

Social work theory adopts a central focus on the environmental context of clients’ lives, which stems from a tradition of systems and ecological perspectives in practice (Healy, 2005; Payne, 2005). Although this environmental focus has traditionally focused on the socio-cultural environment and the interplay of social systems, many social work writers are now calling for an expanded view of the environment to include the physical environment (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates, 2005; Jones, 2010; McKinnon, 2008). These writers argue that if the survival of humanity is at the heart of climate change then this is of central concern to social work. This makes the role of social work implicit in dealing with the impacts of climate change. Further, the domain of social work practice occurring at the micro, meso, and macro levels of society places social workers in a unique position to work with rural families and communities affected by climate change.

Fundamental to social worker involvement in climate change practice is a commitment to social work values espoused by the profession. According to the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 2010), social justice is a core value concerned with power relations and inequalities between groups, including the social structures that preserve inequality. Social workers working with rural families have a responsibility to not only recognise the inequalities between men and women in general, but also the feminist implications for women in a rural context adapting to climate change. A key professional function for social workers in climate change practice is advocacy, which requires the development of opportunities for rural women to voice their concerns and participate in climate change discussions to influence social policy developments. Social workers have a role to play in ensuring that rural women are included in public aspects of rural lifestyle, such as, membership on local councils, land care organisations, environmental groups, fire prevention
planning, business initiatives, and other community groups. The representation of women in the public domain is crucial to bringing the needs of rural women to the forefront of climate change decision making and policy development, and to addressing the existing gender inequalities.

**Conclusion**

This paper identifies the gendered nature of climate change in rural Australia through a review of literature and acknowledges the negative experiences of both men and women. Although the available literature examining gender and climate change is relatively small, it is nevertheless timely to analyse the research trends and the findings of studies in this new field. A concerted effort is needed to recognise and address the gendered implications of climate change and thus avoid, or at least reduce, adverse social outcomes. Further, the implications for rural women are concerning given the structural disadvantage experienced by women in rural Australia, and the increasing risks posed to rural women as a result of the patriarchal context of rural lifestyle.

We found evidence in the literature for inequitable health outcomes for women as a result of climate change, along with a relatively powerless position for rural women in regard to decision making. This combination of factors indicates an area of special social need. Social work as a profession concerned with social justice issues is in a position to become more involved with climate change practice at the individual, group, and community levels of practice, and can assist women and communities to identify the social impacts of climate change and to develop more equitable responses.

**References**


Publication 7: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

Reference details:

Abstract

This chapter explores the de-growth solutions older people employ for living in harmony with the natural environment. In contrast to prevailing mainstream service provider problem-based perspectives, which reflect an ageist discourse, this chapter documents the knowledge and wisdom of older Australians who embrace holistic and sustainable lifestyles. Using a phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were used to examine the life-stories and experiences of older people in order to identify key elements and strategies for sustainable living. Importantly, these stories did not involve a sudden realisation of the environmental crisis or the need for sustainable living. Instead, participants’ wisdom about the concept of sustainability and strategies for ecosocial transformation developed over many years. Outcomes of the research highlighted several themes. These include: personal growth towards connectedness with the natural environment; communities of practice, support and learning; and political action to achieve sustainable living practices. These processes, which parallel critical social work, offer a ‘ripple’ approach to ecosocial transformation.

Introduction

Transformative change from a consumer culture to a way of life that sustains the natural world is imperative for reducing the impact of the current environmental crisis. A rapid increase in greenhouse gas emissions, largely caused by human behaviour, is resulting in unprecedented changes in our climate that threaten the quality of human existence (IPCC 2014). The solution to this worldwide problem lies in transformative change, which involves a fundamental re-orientation of mainstream culture to reflect a holistic understanding of humans as interdependent with the natural world. This
transformation requires a movement away from contemporary, global North lifestyles harmful to the natural environment, towards those that are more sustainable and in harmony with it. This chapter investigates possible strategies for advancing ecosocial transformation by exploring the knowledge and wisdom of older people who have developed sustainable lifestyles and communities. It focuses on environmental protection and stewardship strategies that older people have developed for ecosocial transformation and considers how this knowledge can be applied to the wider community.

Ageism, which refers to discrimination and stereotyping against a specific age group, often produces negative stereotypes that render older people’s citizenship invisible. The term ‘ageism’ was first coined by Robert Butler (1969: 243) who recognised prejudice against older people as a form of ‘bigotry’. Although ageism can be associated with prejudice against any age group, such as children and young people, it is predominantly used in relation to the treatment of older people. Nelson (2005) contends that ageism against older people is institutionally embedded into the fabric of society and is the least challenged form of discrimination. Prevailing economic ideology in the form of neo-liberalism is one example that cultivates the institutional discrimination of older people. Neoliberalism emphasises constant economic growth through full employment and the increased production of goods and services and has been adopted by governments in much of the Global North (Mullaly 2007). This ties an individual’s value to their ability to participate in employment - something that diminishes with age. Yet paradoxically, this economic system presents major challenges because the prioritising of economic growth is a major contributing factor to the cause of anthropogenic global warming (Coates 2005).

This chapter takes the position that older people have knowledge and wisdom about sustainability useful for promoting ecosocial transformation. Despite a scientific preoccupation with the pathology of ageing, the majority of older people live happy, healthy and productive lives through to an advanced age (Harvison et al. 2011). Older age may provide a personal situation that facilitates active contribution to environmental protection, stewardship and sustainability, for example due to retirement and the freedom to pursue a personal interest in sustainability, or reduced incomes and economic circumstances. By identifying approaches and strategies that
older people employ to live holistic and sustainable lives, this chapter provides a refreshing look at the degrowth solutions older people use for living in harmony with the natural environment. This acknowledges the contributions that older people make to promoting sustainability and challenges pervasive negative stereotypes and judgments of older people. This wisdom imparted by older people is valuable for developing community leadership and building community capacity, as well as developing intergenerational relationships. The information is useful for governments, policy makers and the wider community for developing transformative change towards a more sustainable society.

Beginning with a brief discussion about the intersection between older people and environmental sustainability, the research process will be explained, followed by details of the results. The discussion synthesises these results into a broad-based, multidimensional approach to achieving ecosocial transformation that emerges from the wisdom developed over many years by the participants in this study. Interestingly, the key elements needed for ecosocial transformation towards sustainable living identified by participants, parallels social work’s critical approach to practice.

**Older people and sustainability**

Along with the environmental crisis, there is a global demographical change taking place – an ageing population. The United Nations (UN 2013: 9) estimates globally that the number of older people aged 60 years and over is likely to double from 841 million people in 2013 to over 2 billion in 2050. Although two-thirds of the world’s older population live in developing countries, many countries in the Global North are also experiencing this ageing trend. According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2013), the number of people aged 85 years and over increased nationally by 153% over the last two decades, compared with a total population growth of 32% over the same period. Worldwide, it is expected that the number of people aged 60 years and over will exceed the number of children for the first time in 2047 due to decreasing fertility and mortality rates and increasing life expectancy. This change in demographics has major social and economic implications, including monetary stress on support systems, social pressures on younger family members to support older relatives and poverty (UN 2013: 18).
Given the enormity of issues associated with the ageing population and environmental crisis, there has been surprisingly limited international research about the intersection between older people and environmental sustainability. In a report of outcomes from a multidisciplinary conference of gerontology experts and environmental scientists devoted to developing a research agenda on ageing and sustainability, Pillemer et al. (2011) note that researchers have not taken up the call made over a decade ago for gerontological research on issues such as sustainability, environmental stewardship and ecological footprint. The limited literature that does explore the intersection between older people and sustainability is usually conceptualised from problem-based and service-provider perspectives (for example Horton et al. 2010, Filiberto et al. 2009, Haq et al. 2008). For example, Haq and Gutman (2014) discuss the carbon-intensive consumption pattern of baby boomers and the increasing carbon footprint of older people, as well as the vulnerability of older people with regard to the negative health impacts of climate variability. Even literature about older people involved in environmental volunteering has largely focused on individual health outcomes (for example Lum and Lightfoot 2005, Onyx and Warburton 2003) rather than attributes of leadership and environmental protection. This ‘bias’ should be no surprise, given the pervasive influence of ageism discussed in the introduction. The international literature surveyed suggests there is a notable gap in understanding the stewardship and protective capacity older people contribute to developing a sustainable environment.

Similarly, in Australia the literature focuses on older people as service recipients. An Australian report (Harvison et al. 2011) outlined in detail the potential health risks to older people in the context of climate change due to the increased likelihood of chronic disease, physical and cognitive impairment, isolation and financial dependency. These factors associated with the progression of ageing result in increased sensitivities to heat waves, bush fires and tropical storms and floods (Harvison et al. 2011). For example, 80 per cent of the fatalities during the Australian heatwave in the state of Victoria in 2009 were people over 65 years of age and 84 per cent of this group were 75 years and older, indicating that vulnerability increases with age (Cooper 2009). While these studies raise awareness about the needs of older people in the face of climate variability, they also focus on older people as passive
recipients of services, one of the disadvantaged groups who experience heightened vulnerability to environmental threats, or are targets for behaviour change to ameliorate effects of environmental decline.

A few exceptions to this service-provider perspective regarding older people have occurred in Australia in relation to the built environment. For example, studies indicate that older Australians living in retirement homes are concerned about environmental protection and would like their residences to be more sustainable (Xia et al. 2014, Barker et al. 2012, Zuo et al. 2014). In contrast to this, a study in the United States found that while older people expressed a desire to protect the environment, many did not want to become involved in activities that promote sustainability (Wright et al. 2002). Nevertheless, evidence of older Australians taking leadership in environmental protection has been recorded in recent media reports. Ryan (2014) documented his experience as a 92 year old man arrested by police for participating in a demonstration against a coal mine in the Australian state of New South Wales. Ryan states:

> Otherwise, what is the future for my children? I’ve only got a few years left, but I feel in my conscience that I have to take this stand. I’m happy to say that I’ve been here on four occasions, and each time, the numbers are increasing. This sort of direct action is the way of the future.

Also, another Australian newspaper reported details of a 91 year old woman chaining herself to a tree in protest against the destruction of native vegetation in order to build a highway (Hatch 2015). These examples demonstrate the capacity and concern that older people have for the natural environment and suggest that older people are part of the solution to restoring sustainable development and stewardship of our natural environment.

This research begins from the position that older people do exercise agency to actively contribute solutions to environmental concerns. It focuses on the environmental protection and stewardship that a key sector of our community – older people – makes towards a sustainable society. By identifying approaches and strategies that older people employ to live simple, holistic and sustainable lives, this chapter highlights the de-growth solutions older people use for living in harmony with
the natural environment. This acknowledges the contributions that older people make to promoting sustainability and reducing risks associated with climate change impacts, which reverses the often assumed service-provider perspective when working with older people.

When viewed from an ecosocial transformation perspective, older people who develop sustainability strategies are actively contributing to the commons and civil society discussed by Jef Peeters in chapter 5. People who are no longer in fulltime employment and who are attempting to reduce their own ecological footprints, may well be role modelling aspects of post-growth societies described by Suzanne Elsen: contributing to processes of mutuality, collective and bottom-up solutions, sharing and self-sufficiency outlined in chapter 4. Also, older people may be living out principles of relational wellbeing as discussed by Tuula Helne and Tulli Hirvilammi in chapter 3. In contrast to the disadvantaged groups who bear the burden of the effects of environmental degradation, detailed in chapters 6, 7 and 8 in this book, mature and relatively resource-rich people in Australia may have the resources and history to be proactive in their response to environmental issues and consumerism. Growing up in times before the worst excesses of consumerism appeared, they may have different attitudes and lifestyles from those promoted in contemporary mass media today. It is anticipated that the knowledge imparted by older people is valuable for governments, policy makers and the wider community for developing transformative change towards a sustainable society.

**Research Process**

The aim of the research was to explore the experience of mature Australians who aim to live sustainably and in harmony with the natural environment, as well as identifying the strategies used by older people to protect the natural environment. The specific research questions were, ‘What is the experience of older Australians who live sustainable lifestyles?’ and ‘What strategies do older people employ to live sustainably?’

A phenomenological approach was employed for this project, which is concerned with people’s descriptions, experiences, attitudes and perceptions. According to
Denscombe (2010) phenomenology views people as being active agents capable of interpreting their own subjective experiences and making sense of their own realities. This approach was most relevant to the project’s aims of exploring the descriptive experiences of older people involved in environmental protection, as well as identifying the strategies employed by older people for sustainable living.

The key theoretical approach that provided a lens for undertaking the research, including collection and analysis of data gathered, was the strengths perspective. The strengths perspective is underpinned by principles that all people have strengths, capacities and resources, and usually demonstrate resilience in adverse circumstances (Saleeby 2012). Rather than focusing on problems and deficits, this research sought to explore assets and solutions by drawing on the experiences, knowledge and wisdom of older people.

Sampling

Participants consisted of 10 mature-aged Australians over the age of 50 years who were not in full time paid employment. The researchers intentionally selected the age of 50, as opposed to the often used welfare state definition of ‘aged’ or ‘elderly’ as 60 years and over for various reasons, including the fact that the age of life expectancy for Aboriginal Australians is substantially lower than for non-Aboriginal Australians (AIHW 2011). The researchers also considered people over 50 to have had substantial life experience, acquired wisdom and the opportunity to consider their position on issues in life, such as sustainability and ecosocial transformation.

Snowball sampling was used to identify participants. The researchers initially identified someone well-known in the community for environmental protection and advocacy to participate in the research, who then provided details of other people within her network as prospective participants. From these participants further recommendations of prospective participants were obtained and so on, until an adequate number of participants had been interviewed.

Participants consisted of seven females and three males who were located across three Australian states – six participants resided in New South Wales, two resided in South Australia and two resided in Victoria. Of these, three participants lived
in urban locations with populations between 280,000 and 1.2 million people. Four participants resided on the outskirts of small regional townships with populations between 2,500 and 4,500 people, and three people lived on rural farming properties. There were three couples in the sample, with each person being interviewed separately.

**Data collection and analysis**

The data consisted of information gathered during semi-structured interviews of approximately one hour in duration, which occurred either over the phone or face-to-face, depending on the location of each participant. A semi-structured interview was considered the most appropriate method because the researchers were trying to understand potentially complex views and behaviours of people from the perspective of their lived experience. In addition, semi-structured interviews have the capacity to explore unknown concepts without imposing any prior categorisation that might limit the inquiry process.

Due to the exploratory nature of this research, a grounded theoretical approach, involving an inductive process of reasoning was used for data analysis. The purpose of data analysis was to draw from the raw textual data gathered in the data collection process to derive concepts and theory associated with the experience of living sustainably. The significance of using inductive reasoning for the identification of patterns within data provides the possibility of progressing sustainable approaches for living, theory and conceptualisations for application to the wider community. As part of the analysis phase categories, codes and concepts were developed through a systematic review of information gathered to identify themes. This thematic analysis consisted specifically of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Ezzy 2002: 93). This process began with open exploration of data, the identification of categories and application of codes for those categories, and the identification of a central theme that linked the data to emergent theory or conceptualisations.

**Ethical considerations**

The information gathered focused on sustainable lifestyles and strategies and was not of a personal nature. Ethical concerns arising from the research were therefore not
considered high risk. Nevertheless issues associated with confidentiality and anonymity of participants were addressed through the secure storage of data and sensitive use of information that might otherwise identify participants. Ethics approval was obtained from the appropriate university ethics committee.

Limitations

As a non-probability approach to sampling, this research does not make any claim to be representative of older people, nor to the generalisability of findings. Instead, the value of the findings lies in the descriptions, experiences and information provided by older people. As the purpose of this research was to explore aspects of a relatively new area, a positivist approach was inappropriate for the research purpose. As an Australian study, this research might not have relevance to international contexts and strategies may not be transferrable to different cultural contexts. It does, however, provide a starting point for further research in this area.

Findings

The researchers asked participants about their stories relating to sustainability - that is, how their efforts towards living sustainably began, their experience with living sustainably, and what strategies they have developed. Unexpectedly, these stories did not involve the sudden realisation of the environmental crisis or a single event that revealed the need for sustainable living. Instead a life-long story of gradually developing the concept, and strategies to achieve sustainability, emerged. Participants shared their lived experiences, discussing how their challenges and ideas developed through a process of ongoing learning. For example, many participants (six out of 10) began their journey of living sustainably as a child, which had a major influence on their values as adults. Ruth said, ‘I was born and bred into a sustainable lifestyle, but didn’t realise it at the time. The things we did as a family were a way of life and would not have been called sustainable back then.’ Participants also revealed how they had been influenced by various people and life experiences over an extended period of time, which in turn inspired them to work towards sustainable living.

Outcomes of the research highlighted several themes, which will be discussed under the following headings: motivations to adopt sustainable lifestyles; barriers to
living sustainably; strategies for living sustainably; and advice for the wider community.
The participants’ voices have been maintained as far as possible in the reporting of the findings, but names have been changed in order to respect their privacy.

**Motivations to adopt sustainable lifestyles**

**Values**

All the participants (10 out of 10) shared similar values relating to sustainability, including social justice and the importance of community (seven out of 10). Many participants had made links between these values. For example, Theresa described her experience of ‘linking personal and professional values’ relating to the environment and social justice through a process of ongoing reflection and learning. Amelia described herself as a ‘hippie from way back’, saying that income is not the most important thing, but rather ‘community building, conservation, feminism and social justice.’

In the majority of cases a significant life event, such as the death of a loved one, marriage, divorce and immigration provided the opportunity for participants to take action on their values (8 out of 10). For example, one participant upon discovering she had an Aboriginal grandparent said she ‘always had a strong emotional connection to the earth’, but that this experience gave her ‘permission to look at everything with different eyes.’ Similarly, another participant who had undergone a divorce referred to the experience as enabling him to undergo ‘a total reinvention of [him]self.’

The majority of participants (seven out of 10) discussed the importance of community and sharing relationships with other people who share the same values. Lauren said, ‘The environment and sustainability has always been very social for me. I enjoy being with like-minded people, interacting with others and community building.’ Gary also stated, ‘We have moved a few times and found it difficult to find like-minded people with the same sustainable values...learning from others and sharing labour and equipment is important.’

*Seeking knowledge, education and/or a career*
All participants expressed a keen desire for knowledge, education and/or a career relating to sustainability. Every participant had attended some kind of education program, for example workshops, conferences and/or further studies at university or TAFE in areas such as community work, permaculture, building a straw bale house, holistic farm management and organic gardening.

Ruth said:

*I have an enormous hunger for learning and knowledge about living a simple and rich life, but not rich as in money, rather rich as in nature, music, art etc. I have absolutely no ambition for money, work promotions or consumerism; money only drives me in order to survive.*

As well as formal training, learning from other people had also sparked personal action to living a more sustainable life including the inspiration of renowned environmentalists. For example, one participant referred to attending a gathering to hear the leader of the Australian Greens (political) Party speak about the environment, and others referred to a range of widely known environmentalists and authors, such as Rachael Carson, David Suzuki, and James Lovelock.

**Anti-consumerism**

Nearly all of the participants (nine out of 10) expressed strong positions against consumerism in contemporary society, as well as current Australian government policies that promote spending and economic growth. For example, Murray expressed the belief that the ‘greatest threat to the environment is people who think in dollar terms’ and Sonja discussed the challenge to ‘maintain the rage against neo-liberalism.’

Ruth and Theresa said respectively:

*You have to choose whether you are going to be a master of the land or part of it...sustainable living is about a transformative experience with nature, as well as changing your expectations of what you want from life in terms of material resources.*

*You have to re-think what your real needs are. Do you really need those consumer goods? A bigger house? The latest whatever? Do your children need that? Maybe time and effort is what you need to really make a difference.*
In relation to the Australian government, Lauren said, ‘I am outraged by the stubbornness of the current government’. John said he ‘can’t believe the government failed to develop the sustainable electricity policy...tipped on its head...they canned it. Future generations will look back and ask what the hell were they thinking?’

Connection with the land and Aboriginal influences

The majority of participants discussed a deep and personal connection with the natural environment (seven out of 10). Ava described herself as having an emotional and spiritual approach to the world and stated, ‘I have always had a strong emotional connection to the earth...it devastates me to see a pine forest being cleared and I can simply burst out in tears at the sight of it’. John discussed the importance of being in tune with the seasons, ‘When the seasons are moving along I love to tap in, watching for the autumn break, being in tune with the seasons, planting when it rains, watching them ebbing and flowing’.

While just one participant identified as Aboriginal, four participants discussed the influence traditional Aboriginal culture has had on their motivations to live sustainably. As a young man Murray had a large bank debt, yet also wanted to incorporate nature into his future. He knew that Aboriginal people had knowledge of the land and on someone’s advice; he went to see an Aboriginal man in a nearby town. This man told Murray that it’s important to ‘be in a place where God can talk to you’ and Murray said he took his advice by staying close to nature.

As a child Ruth lived next door to the bush where a traditional Aboriginal community resided. She became friends with the Aboriginal children and despite disapproval from the wider community; her parents supported her friendships with the Aboriginal children. Ruth said that as immigrants, her parents always understood that the land belonged to Aboriginal people. Ruth now sees herself as a ‘custodian’ of the land and while she has a ‘profound connection with the natural environment, the land does not belong to [her] – it belongs to Aboriginal people’.

Importance of family
The majority of participants discussed the importance of having a partner with the same values (eight out of 10); however this finding may be an artefact from this project due to the fact that three couples were interviewed as part of this study. Similarly, all but one of the participants who had children (eight out of nine) referred to their children as being part of their motivation for living sustainably. For example, one participant said her children inspired her to move to a property that was a small farm to become self-sufficient. Another participant referred to the effort he makes towards ensuring his grandchildren learn to value the natural environment. He does this by ‘being present with them in the natural world’ and undertaking activities that include building things out of sustainable materials (e.g. cubby houses), camping and ensuring the grandchildren have access to the ‘tactile natural world’.

However, one participant referred to the dilemma she experienced about feeling a great sense of responsibility to provide for her children’s future, for example by paying for the house mortgage and wanting to be able to afford an education for her children. This participant also expressed some concern that she may have set her children up to become ‘wage slaves’. Other participants referred to related dilemmas with regard to money and finances as a barrier to living sustainably, which will be discussed later.

**Barriers to living sustainably**

Participants identified various barriers that have prevented them from adopting a more sustainable lifestyle. In particular, an employment and financial paradox was discussed by nearly all of the participants (nine out of 10). This paradox involved the contradiction of being forced to engage in the prevailing economic model that promotes economic growth for employment, in order to finance the structural elements required for sustainable living. For example, participants referred to financial investments for: large orchards; secure chicken pens to protect the chickens from foxes; photovoltaic energy systems; and water tanks, all of which cost substantial amounts of money. Participants also referred to needing to make further investments, such as netting to protect fruit from birds and machinery to assist with growing foods. Additionally, the participants identified that being employed reduces the time available to undertake sustainable living practices. For example,
Theresa and Ruth stated respectively,

*It’s very hard to live a simple life when you don’t have time to plant vegies, make your own soap and shampoos, cook good home meals…it’s a cycle you fall into because you have to keep working to pay for those things.*

*Earning a living in a simple way is hard when raising a family due to the expenses of children and a lack of time. Even now, being busy with work makes it difficult to care for the chooks and vegie patch.*

Half of the participants (five out of 10) discussed the negative influences caused by living in conservative communities where they experience isolation from like-minded people. Murray described his experience living in conservative farming community and said people ‘self-reinforce their own ideology’, have ‘closed minds’ and create social stigma for people who want to live more sustainably. Ava described the difficulty she experienced with making friends in a conservative community and Amelia described her experience of living in a conservative town when she was in her 20’s, ‘I loved living [there], but couldn’t stay there…it was very different from my ideals. I needed to live in a community with like-minded people... where we could learn from each other and support each other’.

Four participants discussed the impact of ageing, diminishing health and caring responsibilities on their efforts to live sustainably. Sonja is currently caring for an elderly partner. When her partner was previously very ill, she had to withdraw from some of her community activities. Lauren described herself as being generally fit and healthy, however referred to having a sense that she is getting older and that realistically her own physical capacity cannot be sustained. Ava described her observation of people in her community whose age has become an infirmity and although they used to have their own vegetable patch, they no longer have the physical capacity to manage one. Ava believes that ‘community is the answer’ and she shares her freshly grown foods for these people every week.

*Strategies for living sustainably*
All the participants had adopted a range of strategies to reduce their carbon footprints and/or to enjoy the experience of natural and healthy living. For example, all the participants have incorporated subsistence living techniques into their lifestyles, for example by growing their own food, preserving food, composting; worm farming; organics and pesticide free gardens. All the participants adopt a range of simple household approaches, including; using energy efficient lights and light globes; saying no to plastic bags and using green shopping bags; purchasing non-packaged foods and free trade foods; purchasing naturally made clothes; buying food in bulk; shopping locally at the butcher, baker and green grocer; repairing things that are broken; and avoiding large corporate supermarkets.

Nearly all participants (nine out of 10) referred to using alternative economic systems, including: buying second hand items, recycling items; bartering items with neighbours; and participation in Locally Exchange Trading Systems (LETS) involving goods and labour. Almost all participants (nine out of 10) had made efforts towards making their homes more sustainable through large infrastructure modifications, such as: photovoltaic energy systems; solar hot water; rain water tanks; double glazed windows; ceiling fans; window blinds; and straw bale homes. While some participants identified transport as a barrier for living a more sustainable life due to the scarce availability of public transport, half of the participants have adopted transport options that reduce greenhouse gas emissions, such as push-bike riding and public transport.

Many participants participate in strategies aimed at protecting the natural environment at the broader level of society through community and/or political action. For example, two participants were candidates for the Green’s (political) party whose main aim is to protect the natural environment, while others were either members of this political party or supported their values. Some participants had managed to combine their passion for sustainability with their past and/or present employment (five out of 10) by promoting sustainable practices and influencing policy. All participants referred to being members of community groups, such as local permaculture and farmers’ markets groups, and international groups, such as Greenpeace and Amnesty International.
While all these participants have established strategies at the broader level of community and/or political action, two participants were active in a broad-based non-profit community organisation spreading the sustainability message in the wider community: ‘Sustainable Communities South Australia Incorporated’. This organisation targets local government areas and lobbies councils to adopt sustainable living practices (Sustainable Communities SA website, undated). Sustainable Communities SA currently has eight active groups in five local council areas according to Sonja who is a founding member and past chairperson of the Coordinating Committee.

In addition to four public meetings a year, Sustainable Communities SA hosts a monthly ‘One Planet Market’ which offers a range of activities and stalls including a LETS scheme, an information stall, an ‘urban orchard’ and native plant stall, and local produce stalls. The organisation also hosts a website which advertises events, projects, and networks and offers free resources through its online newsletters, and links to resources such as an eco-footprint calculator, and ideas for sustainable economy, energy, food, transport, water and waste. Sonja and a small group of mature people write a monthly blog on current issues about sustainability to contribute to the public discourse and motivate people to become politically active.

Nearly all participants (nine out of 10) discussed their future goals for living sustainably in terms of their continued efforts as individuals to making a difference within the wider community. For example, John said his ‘ultimate goal...[is] to keep it going and spread the word’. Gary expressed an interest in sharing his knowledge overseas and Ruth referred to downsizing and relocating to a nearby town in order contribute to the township in a more meaningful way and reduce their carbon footprint. When asked about her future goals, Theresa said, ‘I am worried about the future of the planet and want my grandchildren to have the delights in nature and adventures like climbing trees, picking fruit, risk taking, etcetera, that I had’.

Advice for the wider community

Participants provided a range of advice for the wider community about living more sustainably. Some advice related to developing personal growth and meaning in life, for example Ruth said, ‘Give yourself time and space to dream – dreams aren’t
dependent on material resources’. Murray said, ‘Find a space and think about life, trust yourself and endeavour to see the bigger picture...and then come back to the things that are powerful and meaningful in life’.

Other participants provided advice involving anti-consumerist principles, for example John said ‘separate needs from wants and be content with what you have’. Creating communities also featured in this advice, for example Theresa said, ‘Link up with other people who can support you to make lifestyle changes ... otherwise you are up against a mainstream of conventional wisdom that is really powerful that can suck you into a lifestyle you don’t really want’. Sonja also referred to communities, and said, ‘Maintain the rage...it’s okay to keep doing what you can do to be sustainable, but the wider community needs to be moving ahead on sustainable and reusable energy’.

Discussion

Drawing together the themes from these findings, a pattern of elements or ‘ripples’ towards ecosocial transformation emerges from the life stories of the older people who participated in this study (see figure 1). These cluster into three levels:

• The individual level of nurturing personal and family growth towards a meaningful connectedness with the natural environment– including households, personal world, values, and sustainability strategies at the individual and family level;

• Networks and communities of practice involving groups of people who share collective learning and support each other in their goals towards sustainability;

• Fostering of activities at the broader level of society to facilitate social, political and cultural change, for example political parties and organisations.
Interestingly, this cluster of elements reflects social work’s critical approach to practice (Allan 2009, Mullaly 2007). Social work is characterised as having a multidimensional approach to practice that spans work with individuals, groups, communities, organisations and broader social and political systems (Connolly and Harms 2012, Healy, 2012). Influential models reflecting this multidimensional approach to practice include ecological systems theory (Siporin, 1975), Germain and Gitterman’s (1980) life model, and Personal Cultural Structural (PCS) model and anti-oppressive practice (Connolly and Harms 2012). This critical approach to practice enables social workers to recognise the political dimensions of the environmental crisis and the interconnectedness between personal and political issues.

As researchers we did not expect that the participants who were from different backgrounds, Australian states and of different ages would have developed such a coherent approach to ecosocial transformation towards sustainability. The picture that emerged was of people actively supporting the commons and civil society from a sense of altruism (see Jef Peeters chapter 5), who embody the principles of relational wellbeing articulated by Tuula Helne and Tulli Hirvilammi in chapter 3 and who have adopted many of the aspects of post-growth societies described in chapter 4 by Suzanne Elsen. Like the older populations studied by Mari Kattilakoski, and Niina
Rantamäki in chapter 11, the participants in this study are taking matters into their own hands to create sustainable communities and lifestyles, employing a ripple-like pattern of living and influence that involves action at individual, group and community/society levels. These three ‘ripples’ resonate with the multidimensional model of social change at micro, meso and macro levels that social work has long upheld. The findings suggest that social workers have an opportunity to seek out and collaborate in partnership with older people to implement their tried and tested strategies for ecosocial transformation in wider society.

**Conclusion**

The findings from this small exploratory study challenge social workers and others to address their own ageism. We need to seek out mature people who are living amongst us as ‘elders’; citizens who have, through years of committed learning, developed ‘wisdom’ in how to achieve ecosocial transformation towards sustainability. These elders have valuable lessons for the whole community which we would do well to heed.

**References**


Sustainable Communities South Australia Inc. Building resilient communities to achieve a one planet lifestyle. [Online]. Available at: http://sustainablecommunitiessa.org.au/about/ [accessed at 14 October 2015].


Publication 8: Developing ecological social work for micro level practice


Chapter summary:

- This chapter outlines an eco-social work framework for integrating theory with micro level practice, including detailed strategies for day-to-day interaction with individuals and families.

- Drawing from critical theory, micro practice can be framed through the lens of two key questions that relate to the natural environment, sustainability and environmental justice.

- These key questions are applied to the theoretical practice approaches of the helping relationship (engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation) and the micro, meso, macro practice method.

- Integrating meso and macro approaches into practice at the micro level is integral to critical social work practice.

Introduction

While previous chapters have discussed the definition, meaning and theoretical basis of eco-social work, this chapter will provide practical information to assist practitioners working at the micro level (for example in counselling positions) to integrate the natural environment and sustainability into professional practice. Much of the emerging literature and knowledge base for eco-social work practice recognises an environmentally aware form of practice at the macro level, for example in social policy and community development (see, for example, Besthorn, 2013; Ife, 2013; Polack, Wood & Smith, 2010). Yet the micro level of practice, often referred to as social care, casework or direct practice, involving work with individuals and families lacks detail despite it being a major form of social work. Although practice at the micro level is usually associated exclusively with working with individuals and families, a critical approach to micro level practice requires consideration of meso and macro levels in order to address structural factors relating to individual issues (Allan, 2009; Chenoweth
This chapter will adopt a critical approach to micro level practice and provide practical information relevant to everyday professional interaction with individuals and families. The term casework will be used to indicate micro level practice throughout this chapter.

While some progress in forming an eco-social work approach to casework is evident (see, for example, Norton, 2012; Heinsch, 2012), many approaches have been conceptualised in broad-based notions premised on social work values and theory, for example in terms of environmental justice (see, for example, Dominelli, 2013). While these are significant advances, the integration of theory with casework, together with examples of good practice, including details about how to apply strategies in real life practice are needed. Molyneux (2010) conducted a comprehensive literature review on eco-social work and concluded that literature relating to practice is vague, lacks application and detail of practice approaches, and is disconnected from everyday interaction with service users. She argues that unless research is undertaken to further develop practice detail then eco-social work will remain a peripheral rather than mainstream approach in social work. This chapter aims to provide an eco-social work framework for integrating theory with micro level practice, including detailed strategies for caseworkers. The approach and strategies suggested in the following discussion are not exhaustive, however they provide a starting point for further eco-social work practice developments.

Beginning with a brief rationale, this chapter will explore an eco-social work framework for integrating theory with practice through the lens of two key considerations that relate to the natural environment – sustainability and environmental justice. This lens will be applied to the practice process of the helping relationship, including engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation phases. Specifically, this will involve the articulation of practical casework strategies for day-to-day work with individuals and families. Finally, integrating meso and macro approaches into casework is explored as integral to effective critical social work at the micro level of practice.
Rationale for eco-social work practice

Social work centred on the natural environment transcends the conventional environmental focus of the social context to a form of social work that designates the natural environment as being pertinent to the profession. At its core, eco-social work recognises the interdependence between the natural environment and human wellbeing. Whilst on the one hand people are influenced by their environment, so too is the environment influenced by people. A critical or structural approach to eco-social work recognises the interplay between individuals and the broader social and political systems that cause disadvantage and unequal power relationships. For the purposes of this chapter, eco-social work practice is understood to include strategies aimed at: promoting factors that contribute to a sustainable world; ameliorating impacts of global warming on disadvantaged groups; and incorporating the natural environment into day-to-day practice to improve health and wellbeing.

Previous chapters have examined the values and principles underpinning eco-social work and therefore will not be discussed in detail in this chapter. However, it is important to recognise recent professional changes to international policy statements and national codes of ethics that have established an associated link between environmental justice and social justice by making a distinct commitment to promoting sustainability, and the equal distribution of environmental benefits and burdens amongst global citizens (see for example, International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], & International Council on Social Welfare [ICSW], 2012; Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010). Social work authors have also discussed in detail the disproportionate impacts of global warming, including environmental disasters and decline on disadvantaged groups, and the resulting need for social work to adopt an eco-social work approach to practice (see for example, Dominelli, 2013; Hawkins, 2010; Jarvis, 2013). This professional movement establishes a professionally sanctioned requirement for social workers to practice in an environmentally conscious way, and is a significant rationale for developing an eco-social work practice response.

Another reason for including the natural environment in social work practice is the evidence relating to the benefits of the natural environment on human health and
wellbeing. Heinsch (2012) summarises the benefits of exposure to nature for therapeutic purposes as having positive impacts on emotional health, physical health and social interactions. Various empirical studies indicate that contact with the natural environment is of considerable importance for emotional wellbeing (Berman, Jonides & Kaplan, 2008). For example, Dijkstra, Pieterse and Pruyn (2008) identify that indoor plants in the health care environment, have a stress-reducing effect on participants presented with a health diagnosis compared to participants with no indoor plant present. Another study identified that the viewing of pictures depicting the natural environment produced restorative effects on cognitive functioning (Berto, 2005). In this study, pictures of the natural environment helped participants recover from an induced state of mental fatigue compared to participants who viewed pictures that did not depict nature. Interestingly, the types of interaction with the natural environment that benefit wellbeing vary from a simple window view or picture of nature (see for example, Kaplan, 2001) to direct contact with natural environments (see for example, Buris, 2007). This literature makes the incorporation of the natural environment into social work practice an achievable and feasible goal within all practice contexts.

Some notable examples of eco-social work practice include wilderness therapy (Besthorn, 2002), projects addressing food security (Besthorn, 2013), community organising (Polack, Wood & Smith, 2010), energy auditing (Borrell, Lane & Fraser, 2010) and animal companionship (RisleyCurtiss, 2010). Gray, Coates and Hetherington (2013a) also provide a compilation of case study examples for eco-social work, including work with drought affected families, young offenders, preservation of ‘green’ space in metropolitan areas and pursuing corporate responsibility of mining companies. Heinsch (2012) focuses on the health benefits of the natural environment by summarising therapeutic benefits of having varying relationships with nature and incorporating these into everyday social work roles, such as assessment and intervention processes. Further, Norton (2012) and Gray, Coates and Hetherington (2013b) explore the micro, meso, and macro approach to eco-social work practice. While these examples are helpful for building an eco-social work approach, many lack details helpful for the day-to-day activities of practitioners. There is a need to provide accessible and practical information relevant to everyday professional interaction with service users that is adaptable to various social work contexts. The aim of this chapter
is to build on these understandings and to provide a framework that is applicable to a wide range of contexts at the micro level of practice, for example people with disabilities, older adults, mental health and people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

A framework for integrating social work theory with casework practice

Social work incorporates various conceptualisations of practice used for working with individuals, groups, and communities. As part of this, social work has a range of theories or models for processes and methods that inform practice (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Healy, 2014). Practice processes describe procedures or stages of an approach from a beginning to an end, and can be applied to various contexts (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015). For example, the process of the helping relationship has been selected in this chapter to identify and develop eco-social work strategies for casework practice. Practice methods relate to different levels or domains of practice which social workers interact with, such as the micro, meso and macro levels of practice (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015).

Drawing from critical theory, several authors argue that effective casework practice involves a focus on individual and structural aspects, and that these should not be treated as separate approaches (Allan, 2009; Mullaly, 2007). Bland, Renouf and Tullgren (2009) acknowledge the tensions that exist in Australian social work, particularly in mental health practice, relating to the dualism between clinical and critical models of casework practice. They contend that these approaches are not conflictual, but rather complementary in addressing structural factors relating to individual issues, such as inequality and power imbalances. This means that in addition to a focus on the individual, for example via the provision of individual therapy, an effective approach to casework practice also considers factors at the meso (group) and macro (community) levels of practice. All these levels therefore become focus areas for change in a critical approach to eco-social work at the casework or micro level of practice.

I propose applying two key considerations to inform eco-social work practice that involves the integration of the natural environment and sustainability into day-to-day activities. Posed as questions, these considerations are: as part of practice, how can we
promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline? And, how can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice? By integrating these key questions with social work processes and methods, practitioners can begin to identify practical strategies for eco-social work with individuals and families.

**Applying the framework to casework practice**

The process of the helping relationship is often used to present an approach for working with individuals and families at the micro level of practice. Although this process is more often fluid or circular in practice, a structured approach is considered most effective for purposes of learning. Many authors refer to specific stages that include engagement, assessment, intervention, evaluation, and termination phases (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015; Healy, 2012; Parker & Bradley, 2010). Compton, Gallaway and Cournoyer (2005) refer to an integrated approach to practice underpinned by four specific phases: engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation. These four phases show the interconnectedness of each phase to the overall helping relationship and will be used to identify eco-social work strategies for casework practice.

**Engagement**

The engagement phase of the helping relationship involves building rapport with the individual or family to establish a positive and effective working relationship (Thompson & Thompson, 2008). While the building of rapport is required throughout the whole helping relationship to sustain a healthy and constructive working relationship, certain aspects of early engagement are considered essential for forming beginning foundations, including trust, empathy, genuineness and warmth (Healy, 2012). Characteristics of the engagement phase also involve clarification of the purpose, exploration of needs, and scope and limitations of the relationship, including matters of time and confidentiality (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015).

The engagement phase provides opportunities to increase contact with the natural environment in order to improve the overall therapeutic process. As mentioned, Heinsch (2012) summarises the benefits of exposure to the natural environment.
environment for therapeutic purposes as having positive impacts on emotional health, physical health and social interactions. She concludes that all types of interaction with the natural environment can have positive impacts for therapeutic purposes, including a simple observation of nature (e.g. window view, poster), being in close proximity to nature (e.g. local parks, garden near house) and having direct interaction with nature (e.g. walking, gardening, hiking, interaction with animals) (Heinsch, 2012). This research suggests that even simple and brief interactions with the natural environment are of vital importance for aspects of emotional wellbeing and can be used in social work practice for enhancing the therapeutic process.

The engagement phase also provides numerous opportunities for the ecologically mindful practitioner to promote sustainability through subtle awareness raising techniques. This may not necessarily involve any verbal communication unless deemed appropriate, and may include posters depicting pro-active sustainability behaviours or environmental issues and information (e.g. pamphlets) about local environmental groups or alternative economies (e.g. community gardens, food co-ops). Using the proposed framework, Table 1 provides examples of possible skills and strategies for increasing exposure to the natural environment during the engagement phase.
Table 1. Eco-social work framework during engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Key Considerations</strong></th>
<th><strong>Practice Strategies</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice?</td>
<td>Consider where the first interview can take place.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is it possible to meet outside, under a tree, at the park, at the farm, at the nature reserve, or at the recreation field? Consider the reception area and the interview room.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can blinds or windows be opened?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can an indoor plant be placed inside?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Can pictures of nature be hung on the wall?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can flowers be put in a vase?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can recorded sounds of nature be played?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline?</td>
<td>Consider the reception area and the interview room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can posters depicting pro-environmental behaviours or environmental issues be displayed?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can information about local environmental groups and forums be on display?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Can information about environmental programs, such as free household audits and subsidies, be provided?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Practitioner Example:**

As a school social worker, I was working with a young adolescent male who was not participating in school activities. The Principal referred the student to me in the hope that I would be able to ‘fix’ the student’s problems; however engaging with the student was proving difficult. During the first two visits, the student sat in my counselling room very quietly and refused to extend on any dialogue longer than two or three words. The student was not aggressive at all, but was subdued and even appeared at times to be sad. All of my ‘talking’ and communication skills were proving to be grossly ineffective, and my rather ‘cool’ and highly decorative counselling room was not breaking down any barriers. So one day I decided to take him outside. We sat underneath a large shady tree on the grass that overlooked the agricultural section of the school. After some small talk about the weather, view and the novelty of being outside, he told me for the first time something about himself. He told me that when
he used to live with his mum there was a big, old tree in the back yard that he used to climb. One thing led to another and over the next few visits I felt the student was engaging more and more. There were some set-backs and sometimes he didn’t attend, but increasingly the student appeared to enjoy meeting with me outside. It was not until much later that I realised the impact of the natural surroundings – the tree, its shade, the grass, the view, and even the few sheep grazing in the agricultural section of the school.

Assessment

The assessment phase of the helping relationship involves the gathering of information to develop a shared understanding of the individual or family’s situation (Healy, 2012). Assessment involves the breaking down of complex situations, the prioritising of needs, application of relevant theory, and the analysis of strengths (Milner & O’Byrne, 2009). The information gathered during assessment forms the basis for identifying strategies and action for addressing issues in the intervention phase.

Firstly, the assessment process in eco-social work practice acknowledges the positive impacts that the natural environment has on human health and wellbeing and therefore investigates the individual’s current level of contact with the natural environment. The identification of limited access or exposure to the natural environment may indicate opportunities for developing interventions, such as positive health and social outcomes. Social workers may ask the question, “What kind of access does the individual have with the natural environment?” Secondly, an ecosocial work assessment explores the structural factors, including social, economic and environmental impacts, experienced by the individual that are associated with global warming, including environmental disasters and decline. For example, a family experiencing food affordability issues may be viewed in the context of the effects of climate change and subsequent increasing prices of food, lack of availability of food sources, and household food insecurity (Besthorn, 2013). The social worker may ask the question, “What effects of global warming is the individual experiencing?” These questions inform the conversation that takes place throughout the assessment phase and may become additional components to existing elements covered or listed in organisational assessment schedules (see Table 2).
Table 2. Eco-social work framework during assessment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
<th>Practice Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice?</td>
<td>Consider health issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the individual or family have any physical or emotional health issues? Can health and wellbeing be improved by contact with the natural environment?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Consider access to the natural environment or ‘green’ space</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• How can current activities be expanded to include the natural environment? Are there possibilities for increased involvement?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Does the individual or family have outdoor ‘green’ space in a yard or area attached to the house or dwelling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Is the household residence located near any ‘green’ space?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the individual or family participate in any outdoor activities?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the individual or family access any ‘green’ space as part of day-to-day activities? E.g. school playground, park on the way to work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider interaction with animals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Does the individual or family own a pet?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• If space or the cost of pet ownership is an issue, does the family have access to other animals? E.g. local animal shelter</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Key Considerations | Practice Strategies
--- | ---
As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline? | Consider health issues
- Could environmental decline in the home, workplace or local community be a source of existing health issues?

Consider social networks
- Does the individual or family have support networks? Could isolation be reduced through nature-based activities?
- Consider individual and family issues that relate to environmental decline and hardship:
  - Do all family members have access to healthy and nutritious food on a daily basis?
  - Is the individual or family experiencing increased electricity prices and is this affordable?
  - Is household heating and cooling adequate for extreme weather events, especially for vulnerable individuals such as babies, or people experiencing health issues?
  - Is the household residence located near any environmental hazards?
  - Are household appliances environmentally friendly?

**Intervention**

The intervention phase of the helping relationship involves putting in place plans made with individuals and families to achieve agreed upon goals (Parker & Bradley, 2010). Intervention requires the social worker and individual to take steps or actions to meet identified goals, needs or to address problems. The intervention phase allows the eco-social worker to consider how the natural environment might complement existing techniques to enhance the therapeutic process. For example, nature-based
interventions such as eco-therapy (Buris, 2007), walking mindfully (Young, 2010), wilderness therapy (Besthorn, 2002) and animal-assisted therapy (Risley-Curtis, 2010), among others, may be used to reduce issues of stress, anger, anxiety, isolation, and health issues (see Table 3). An ecological focus could also involve consideration of individual and family issues caused by structural dimensions of environmental decline such as environmental hazards, increasing energy costs, food security and protection from extreme weather events (e.g. heat waves and cold snaps). Interventions could include liaising with local environmental groups, accessing food and electricity vouchers, undertaking household energy audits and locating (or developing) a community garden.

Table 3. Eco-social work framework during intervention

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
<th>Practice Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| How can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice? | Consider opportunities for improving health and wellbeing (Kaplan, 2001; Maas, et al., 2006)  
  - How can contact with the natural environment be enhanced? How can natural spaces be created at home, school, and the workplace?  
  Consider interaction with outdoors  
  - What problem-solving activities can be used that involve the natural environment?  
  Consider useful eco-therapies  
  - E.g. Contemporary eco-therapy (Buris, 2007), walking mindfully (Young, 2010), exercising outdoors, Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT) (Risley-Curtiss, 2010), wilderness therapy (Besthorn, 2002)  
  Consider issues of isolation and the development of support networks  
  - What local groups or activities occur in the community that involve the natural environment?  
  Consider interaction with animals |
Is it possible to register a therapy animal and bring an animal to work? Can an animal-assisted therapy program in the area be located? Can the animal shelter in the area be used to assist with developing client relationships with a pet?

| As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline? | Consider potential for improving health by removing household environmental hazards E.g. poor ventilation, air conditioner quality

Consider potential for improving health by adding positive environmental qualities E.g. indoor plants, opening windows

Consider alternative economies

- Can information about where to access locally grown produce be provided? E.g. Food banks, Local Energy Transfer Systems (LETS), local markets, food co-ops, community gardens

Consider rising energy costs

- Can information about free energy audits be provided? Are there relevant non-government support programs? E.g. Food and electricity vouchers

Consider developing awareness

Can information about environmental disasters (such as bush fires) and decline be provided? |

**Practitioner Example:**

As a generalist counsellor for Community Health, one of my clients, Mika, had experienced major losses in her life, including a male partner who developed a secret relationship with another woman, and her mother who had died from cancer six months ago. The grief associated with these losses in her life was having a major impact on her ability to maintain friendships and concentrate at work. During a visit, Mika identified the park as a place for her to unwind at the end of the week. As part of Mika’s recovery we developed visualisation exercises at the park as an important part of her care plan. Mika took her picnic blanket and laid under a shady tree to view the clouds. By focusing on the shapes and movement of the clouds in the sky, Mika was able to find solitude and inner peace, even if for just a short while. One day there were no clouds in the sky so Mika read a book instead, and another day she ventured up to the park café to buy a coffee. Eventually, the integration of other activities became a
feature of Mika’s park visits. Of course, Mika’s park visits were not the only activity on her care plan that facilitated her recovery, but they were certainly an integral part of her coping through an extremely difficult time.

Evaluation

The evaluation phase of the helping relationship refers to the practice of reviewing the impact of intervention and celebrating achievements (Healy, 2012). Evaluation considers whether the intervention process achieved goals set out by the individual or family, and whether further plans for action are required to meet any unmet goals. Although evaluation is often a neglected part of practice, it is in fact a professional obligation and part of ethical practice. According to the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (BASW, 2012, p.15), “Social workers should reflect and critically evaluate their practice and be aware of their impact on others”. In the current trend toward increasing accountability, the evaluation phase also responds to external pressures and ensures social work practice is answerable to managers, critical and open to scrutiny from the wider public (Parker & Bradley, 2010; Thompson & Thompson, 2008). It is important to consider whether opportunities for increased contact with the natural environment was developed, and if so then whether any benefits were achieved. For example, if isolation was addressed by participation in a local women’s walking group, then evaluation of whether relationships were developed and whether wellbeing was enhanced needs to take place (see Table 4). Also, review of opportunity for promoting sustainability and empowerment of people at risk of experiencing environmental disasters or decline forms part of the evaluation phase.

Table 4. Eco-social work framework during evaluation

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
<th>Practice Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we incorporate the natural environment as part</td>
<td>Consider how the use of the natural environment was used throughout the case work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of day-to-day practice?</td>
<td>process</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Were opportunities developed to expose the individual or family to the natural</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>environment throughout the casework process? What evidence can be provided to</td>
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<td></td>
<td>demonstrate that the natural environment reduced problems or benefited the individual?</td>
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</table>
What feedback has the individual or family provided?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What feedback has the individual or family provided?</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider the individual and family issues that relate to risk of environmental disaster and decline and hardship</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Did the casework process allow time to discuss the personal and public dimensions of environmental disasters and decline with the individual and family? Was environmental awareness increased? Were alternative programs identified and accessed to address these issues e.g. food programs, alternative economies such as community gardens</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Integrating meso and macro approaches into micro level eco-social work practice**

Having discussed the micro level of casework practice in detail by examining the engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation phases of the helping relationship, this section highlights the integration of meso and macro eco-social work strategies into casework. As mentioned, an effective approach to casework involves consideration of individual, group, community and broader social and political systems, which is in line with critical social work practice (Allan, 2009; Mullaly, 2007). Given the political dimensions of environmental decline, this approach is imperative for social work’s commitment to social justice and environmental justice. Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2015, p. 191) emphasise that while the focus in casework may be on the individual, “...the practitioner takes in all three levels, assessing the person in terms of their family, society, local community and so on...A range of interventions and skills are employed to achieve change and positive outcomes at these different levels.” Using an integrated approach to inform casework strategies, the following discussion will examine the meso, and macro levels of eco-social work practice with consideration of the following questions: *as part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and*
decline? And, how can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice?

Meso Practice Strategies for Caseworkers

The meso level of practice involves interaction with organisations. Social work is primarily undertaken within an organisational context, and to some extent practice is shaped or influenced by the priorities, practices and policies of their employing organisation (Healy, 2014). Often, social workers are faced with competing principles within organisations that constrain or compromise environmental care and concern (Marlow & van Rooyan, 2001; McKinnon, 2013). However, social workers are able to address these challenges and create opportunities for implementing eco-social work strategies by influencing their managers and colleagues. Examples include, advocating for the inclusion of ecological items, such as household energy audits on assessment schedules and introducing nature-based activities as casework intervention strategies.

Eco-social work at the meso level of practice also aims to connect individuals and families experiencing similar issues in relation to the natural environment and sustainability. Group approaches to practice may recognise the value of the natural environment to enhance therapeutic purposes, and may involve an additional aspect of nature-based activity for addressing common health issues, stress or isolation. Meso level approaches also acknowledge that specific groups of people may share common impacts and concerns about global warming, whether this relates to education about sustainable behaviours or addressing the impacts of extreme heat on vulnerable groups such as older people, babies and those suffering from ill health. Other examples are provided in the Table 6 below.

Table 6. Eco-social work framework at the meso level of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
<th>Meso Practice Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we incorporate the natural environment as part of practice?</td>
<td>• Integrate the natural environment with group work intervention for people who share common problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Reduce isolation between people by organising nature-based activities.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Include the natural environment as part of the organisational assessment process e.g. ascertain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Key Considerations</td>
<td>Meso Practice Strategies</td>
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<tr>
<td>---------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>part of day-to-day practice?</td>
<td>current contact with the natural environment, household energy auditing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide managers with evidence relating to the benefits of the natural environment for improving health and wellbeing to justify eco-social work strategies employed in practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Provide managers with evidence relating to the social impacts of global warming on vulnerable groups in order to develop eco-social work practice strategies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disaster and decline?</td>
<td>• Develop self-help and advocacy groups for people who share similar environmental disadvantages.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Work with families in the community towards sustainable practices, including a reduction in household carbon footprints and preparation for extreme weather events.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Liaise with groups and organisations, such as local schools, to facilitate moves towards sustainable practices.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Collaborate with other like-minded social workers within the employing organisation to develop an informal task-force for eco-social work practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Develop leadership in practice by supporting new practitioners and mentoring other colleagues about the importance of eco-social work practice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Collaborate with other like-minded organisations to work with inter-disciplinary teams to achieve common goals relating to eco-social work practice.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Consider using language familiar to management to, such as efficiency or cost effectiveness, advocate for strategies that promote ecological practice e.g. nature-based group work programs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Encourage social work practitioners to consider management positions and to integrate eco-social work with the organisational approach.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Promote administrative practices within the organisation that are pro-environmental e.g. recycling, turning off power boards.</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>• Reduce car emissions by promoting public transport options or car pooling with colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Make reference to government legislation and organisational policies that support sustainability to advocate for sustainable practices.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Make reference to professional social work policy statements, including code of ethics to establish the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Key Considerations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meso Practice Strategies</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>profession’s commitment to sustainability with social work colleagues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Advocate for the development of ecological and sustainable policies and practices as part of organisational goals if these do not exist by joining organisational decision-making committee’s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provide a submission to management about the issues and solutions for furthering the organisation’s position on sustainability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Work towards changing organisational processes to account for sustainability by negotiating or confronting decision makers about the consequences of environmental disasters and decline</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Ensure to practice pro-environmental behaviours in own office or workspace e.g. turning light switches off, minimising heating and cooling appliances.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Practitioner Example:

At our bi-monthly local social workers group I listened to a presentation about eco-social work. As a drug and alcohol counsellor, I had never thought about global warming as having an unfair impact on my clients, or to the benefits of nature on their rehabilitation. With such a big caseload, I find it difficult to look beyond the crises I seem to be dealing with on a day-to-day basis. After the presentation though, I was so impressed that as soon as I went to work the next day I spoke with my manager about what I had learned. She allowed me to bring nature into the reception area and counselling rooms with indoor plants and pictures. At our next team meeting, I asked if I could invite the speaker from the social worker’s group to provide a workshop for staff. I also requested that sustainability be put on the agenda as an ongoing business issue – they agreed!

### Macro Practice Strategies for caseworkers

The macro level of practice promotes change at the community, research or policy level of practice. As mentioned, eco-social work strategies at the macro level are not separate or distinct from casework practice, but rather complement social work’s
unique multidimensional and critical approach to addressing individual problems. At this level eco-social workers aim to work with community groups, researchers and decision makers at the policy level to address the structural issues associated with global warming, including environmental disasters and decline. According to the BASW Code of Ethics (2012, p. 9), the professional value of social justice requires social workers to “challenge unjust policies and practices”. Although macro elements of practice are most often neglected due to time and organisational constraints, it is this level of practice that can have far-reaching impacts on large sections of people within the community. This is particularly relevant to eco-social work because environmental disasters and decline have disproportionate impacts on the most disadvantaged citizens in society (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2005).

While the viewing of the natural environment is associated with individual wellbeing (see, for example, Berto, 2005), literature also supports the development of access to the natural environment at the community level (see, for example, Maas et.al, 2006). Jiang, Li, Larson and Sullivan (2014) undertook a study that required fatigue-induced participants to view streets with varying densities of tree scapes, and found that the higher the density of trees the more participants recovered from stress and fatigue. Kuo and Sullivan (2001) found an association between reported rates of crime and the green surroundings of apartment buildings. The more green the view from apartment buildings, the fewer the crimes reported to police within the community. Alternatively, research also suggests that the loss of the natural environment and associated nature-based activities due to environmental disasters and decline in communities, such as farming communities (see, for example, Alston & Whitney-Soanes, 2008) and Indigenous populations (see, for example, Wilcox et.al., 2013) contributes to health and wellbeing issues, including mental health issues. Many community work models now incorporate ecological principles into practice, including Ife’s (2013) vision of community development which is based on ecological, social justice and postenlightenment perspectives. Examples of casework strategies that incorporate macro level approaches are included in Table 5 and may include political action, lobbying, consciousness raising and research to influence policy and social change.
Table 5. Eco-social work framework at the macro level of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Key Considerations</th>
<th>Macro Practice Strategies</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>How can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice?</td>
<td>• Consider the community’s access to the natural environment e.g. parks and playgrounds, community gardens, national parks and wildlife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider the tree-scape of the community. Can tree planting activities be undertaken?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider access to leisure activities in the community. Can access be increased through marketing or alternative transport options? Can new nature-based programs be introduced?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline?</td>
<td>• Consider whether environmental issues exist in the community e.g. local mining, declining water availability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Discuss environmental issues with individuals, groups and communities as part of consciousness-raising activities</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Invite individuals to participate in or represent particular groups at local meetings and forums</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Write letters to local, state and national government representatives about environmental community concerns.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advocate for disadvantaged groups effected by environmental issues to relevant local, state, and national bodies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Liaise with and support local community groups and charity organisations to adopt an environmental focus.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Advocate that all public housing be restored to improve energy efficiency and environmental resilience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Support local research projects by participating in activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Consider political action and lobbying. Can membership of relevant environmental networks, campaigns and activist groups be facilitated? Can petitions to key government representatives about environmental issues be facilitated?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Summary

This chapter has explored an eco-social work framework for assisting caseworkers integrate theory with practice. Key considerations for casework involving the natural
environment, sustainability and environmental justice have been applied to social work process and practice methods, including the process of the helping relationship (engagement, assessment, intervention and evaluation) and the micro, meso, macro practice method, to demonstrate practical approaches for eco-social work. The range of suggested strategies demonstrates the relative ease with which eco-social work can be applied to casework practice.

Questions for reflection

1. What is your personal experience with nature?

2. How might global warming impact on the lives of vulnerable groups?

3. How might social workers integrate nature into practice to enhance wellbeing for vulnerable groups?

4. How might social workers be able to influence organisations to adopt more sustainable practices?

Additional reading suggestions


References


Publication 9: A transformative eco-social model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work

Reference details:

Abstract

This paper argues for transformative eco-social change in social work to address the profession’s most challenging paradox—inherent modernist roots that contradict the philosophical base of practice. The dual dependency between the welfare state and industrial capitalism brings to light the profession’s role in sustaining modernism and inadvertent contribution to the misuse of nature. In the context of an accelerating global environmental crisis that disproportionately affects the world’s poorest, an environmentally sensitive approach to practice has never been more important. Using an ecologically centred approach, this paper aims to address the profession’s paradox by conceptualising an eco-social model that is congruent across the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice. By adopting a distinct philosophical base that emphasises holism and inter-dependence, social work can build a consistent philosophical base and promote transformative change towards a more sustainable environment.

Keywords: Philosophy, professional practice, social work theory

Introduction

Transformative change within social work from an anthropogenic worldview to an ecologically centred worldview is crucial for addressing impacts of the global environment crisis (Gray and Coates, 2015). This conceptualisation represents a significant shift in consciousness about the place of humans in the natural world and challenges social work’s conventional ontological base. Bell (2012) contends that the profession persistently over-relies on conventional paradigms in mainstream social
work, which are grounded in positivist and modernist roots. She further argues that the inconsistency between social work’s ontological foundations and many of social work’s epistemological concepts, such as anti-oppressive and critical approaches, represent a major contradiction in the conceptualisation of the profession’s philosophical base. Drawing on Bell’s (2012) analysis, it is argued that an ecologically centred approach to practice provides the transformative change required to address incongruences with prevailing modernist assumptions, which inadvertently contribute to the misuse of nature. This paper aims to address the profession’s paradox by conceptualising a transformative eco-social model which is congruent across the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice.

There is worldwide consensus that an environmental crisis is taking place involving an increase in greenhouse gas emissions which is causing unprecedented rises in temperature trends and an increase in climate variability (IPCC, 2014). Other environmental factors of concern include: increasing pollution; loss of habitat; extinction of species; and an increasing world population (UNEP, 2014). The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment (2005) found that approximately 60 per cent of the world’s ecosystems are being used unsustainably, which is drastically affecting the future and quality of human existence, food and water supply, climate regulation, air quality and leisure activities. The solution to this worldwide problem lies in transformative change (Gray and Coates, 2015; Peeters, 2012), which involves a fundamental reorientation of human-centred perceptions of the world towards views that reflect a holistic and interdependent view of humans as part of the natural world. According to Boetto and Bowles (2017), transformative change also involves a movement away from contemporary consumerist lifestyles that are harmful to the natural environment towards lifestyles focused on sustainability and harmony with the natural environment. Like many disciplines and professions, social work could be part of this solution.

Towards a definition of eco-social work

Social work that takes account of the natural environment has been associated with various terms to mark it as distinct from conventional practice, including green social
work (Dominelli, 2012), environmental social work (Gray et al., 2013), eco-social work (Peeters, 2012) and holistic environmental perspective (Gray and Coates, 2015). While authors have varying views about which name is most appropriate, their overall shared incentive is to identify a practice that transcends the conventional social environmental focus to place the natural environment as being central to the profession. For the purposes of this paper, the natural environment refers to an organic environment consisting of relationships within and between living organisms, including humans and any single element of the natural environment, such as water, air, soil, plant or animal as well as a range of collective habitats and ecosystems found in parks, gardens, farms and the wilderness (Maller et al., 2005). While the natural environment is often idealised, even romanticised, for its beauty, this paper acknowledges darker qualities of the natural environment, which include the effects of disease and natural disasters on all living organisms.

Many authors agree that eco-social work is more than an add-on or expansion of existing social work approaches (Gray and Coates, 2015). It is argued that simply adding the natural environment to existing social work approaches sustains the dominant modernist paradigm, which invariably contributes to the exploitation of the natural environment. In contrast, eco-social work involves a paradigmatic shift in understanding about the place of humans in the natural world (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003). Central to this shift or transformation is an understanding that Earth is a holistic entity made up of interconnections between living organisms within a much larger system (Coates et al., 2006).

While some progress in forming an eco-social work definition is evident, many of these have not involved a paradigmatic shift that provides a clear alternative to existing modernist approaches in social work. Drawing from several authors, the eco-social model discussed in this paper seeks to reflect the characteristics conducive to transformative change, including:

- adopting a holistic worldview, which perceives every aspect of life as interconnected within a much larger system as reflected in Indigenous perspectives;
• fostering global citizenship within social work, which reflects an appreciation for cultural diversity and contributions made to social work by the Global South;
• adopting fundamental ecological values within the profession relating to sustainability and de-growth;
• reconceptualising an understanding of well-being to foster holistic, environmental and relational attributes; and
• expanding the activities of social workers, including environmentally related work at personal, individual, collective, community and political dimensions of practice.

Towards a model for eco-social work

Eco-social work has recently gained considerable attention within the profession and various approaches emphasising aspects of eco-social work have been proposed by contemporary authors. These approaches have explored specific focus areas of eco-social work, including Indigenous ecospirituality (Coates et al., 2006), sustainable development (Peeters, 2012), deep ecology (Besthorn, 2002), environmental justice (Dominelli, 2013), global citizenship (Boetto and Bell, 2015) and disaster recovery (Dominelli, 2015; Ku and Ma, 2015). Common characteristics between these approaches begin with an acknowledgement of the environmental crisis and the interdependent link this has with human health and well-being, and the future of human existence (Boetto and Bowles, 2017; Gray et al., 2013). Significantly, the prevailing economic ideology in the form of neo-liberalism, which promotes the free market and profit-making strategies, is critiqued for causing environmental degradation through the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources (Coates, 2003; Coates et al., 2006).

Other key characteristics of these approaches include: a holistic understanding of the natural world (Besthorn, 2002; Coates, 2003), culturally located community-based approaches (Dominelli, 2015; Ku and Ma, 2015), a critical and anti-oppressive theoretical approach (Dominelli, 2013; Narhi, 2004), an environmental/ecological and social justice valuebase (Dominelli, 2013; Peeters, 2012) and emancipatory practice and social action (Boetto and Bell, 2015; Narhi, 2004). These characteristics provide a
basis from which to develop an eco-social model that takes into account the practical realities of everyday interaction with individuals, groups and communities.

An additional characteristic worth noting is the reproof made by Coates (2003) about the origins of social work. Not only does Coates (2003) critique the prevailing economic ideology of neo-liberalism like many other authors; he further contends the profession has sustained neo-liberalism and contributed to the exploitation of nature by helping people to adapt and participate in a society where the dominant economic model is centred on neo-liberal values of individualism and competition. Coates (2003) identifies the co-dependency between social work and the welfare state as a major dilemma for the profession whose contemporary mission is at odds with industrialist capitalist objectives. This analysis corresponds with criticisms made by Bell (2012) concerning the inconsistency between social work’s ontological base grounded in modernism and many of social work’s epistemological concepts. These authors highlight a major paradox in the profession, which challenges social work to consider transformative change and reconcile inherent problems associated with modernist assumptions.

**A transformative eco-social model**

The proposed eco-social model (see Figure 1) depicts the ontological base as central to social work practice.

![Figure 1: Transformative eco-social model](image)
This ontological base represents the ‘being’ aspect of social work and refers to aspects relating to the ‘self’, including the worldview, beliefs and attitudes of the practitioner. The middle circle represents the epistemological base of social work, or the ‘thinking’ aspect. This aspect relates to the application of professional knowledge, values and ethics to inform an eco-social practice approach. Finally, the outer circle represents the methodological base or the ‘doing’ aspect of social work. This aspect is perhaps least articulated in eco-social work literature and refers to the actions, interventions and strategies used in everyday interaction with individuals, families and communities.

**Being: identity as interconnectedness with nature (inner circle)**

The personal dimension (see Figure 1) of how we understand and relate to the natural environment is central to a transformative eco-social approach to practice. Inevitably, our ontology or ‘being’, which is made up of personal morals, beliefs and attitudes, influences our behaviour and approach to professional practice. Our attitude towards the natural environment, including what we believe, how we feel and our experience with the natural world, will influence our interaction with individuals, families and communities—that is, our sense of belonging or identity as being interconnected with the natural world will be evident in practice. For those living in highly urbanised or depleted environments where there may be limited opportunities to associate with the positive aspects of nature, a fundamental critical appreciation of the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural world may be sufficient. If we are consciously aware of the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural world, then it is more likely the natural environment will be integrated into practice. As our relationship with the natural environment is fostered and our understanding matures, we will come to recognise ourselves as existing within a holistic world where our well-being is dependent upon the collective well-being of others. The impact that our own lifestyle choices have on the natural environment and people everywhere will be called into question, such as our purchasing and consumption behaviours. Our personal and professional spheres may then begin to merge and reflect a newly found reverence for the natural environment.

Eco-feminism provides a platform for constructing a new ontology within social work. Eco-feminists, such as Plumwood (2002), argue against the dualism that has
occurred between people and the natural environment, and advocate for a merging of the ‘self’ with the natural world. Plumwood further contends that, the more we justify our separation from nature for economic and other purposes, the less we are able to respond to the environmental crisis. That is, when we situate ourselves as being outside of the natural world, we lose our connection and reciprocal relationship with the natural environment through a culture of domination. Drawing from eco-feminism, it is essential that the profession eliminate not only the domination of nature, but also the hierarchical feature of many human relationships. Social work writers, such as Bell (2013), Besthorn and McMillen (2002) and Norton (2012), advocate for the incorporation of these ideas into social work.

Influenced by deep ecology, Besthorn (2002) advocates for a holistic view of self; this refers to a deeply personalised and spiritual connection with the natural environment. This holistic approach has similarities with an Indigenous worldview, which Baskin (2015) describes as a connection between people, communities, creation, the Creator and the spirit world. In Australia, a holistic and spiritual connection with the natural world was a central part of many traditional belief systems (Green and Baldry, 2008). As custodians of the land, Indigenous peoples worldwide generally took land care seriously and used practices that were relational, renewable and sustainable for all living organisms. This holistic worldview provides the opportunity for social workers to adopt a broader ontological base involving a conceptualisation of the ‘self’ as a relational part of a much larger system.

**Thinking: professional knowledge and values (middle circle)**

Building an epistemological base that is congruent with our ontological base is essential for a transformative approach to eco-social work. The epistemological base of an eco-social model involves the ‘thinking’ dimension of practice (see Figure 1). Essentially, an eco-social model requires the application of knowledge and professional values that inform our approach and make practice purposeful and assist with understanding and organising complex information. Table 1 provides a summary of how knowledge and values can be used to inform an epistemological foundation for eco-social practice.
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<tr>
<th>Eco-social elements</th>
<th>Practice transformations for social workers</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ecological justice</strong></td>
<td>Conceptualising justice within a holistic perspective, and acknowledging justice as important for all living organisms</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition of the disproportionate impacts of the environmental crisis on the world’s poorest citizens</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ecological literacy</strong></td>
<td>Knowledge and understanding of nature’s systems, ecology and the place of humans within the natural world</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge about how to promote and sustain healthy ecosystems</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding of the environmental crisis, including human activity that has contributed to this crisis</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Indigenous perspectives</strong></td>
<td>Learning from traditional Indigenous cultures about living in harmony with the natural world, based on spiritual beliefs, holism, collectivism and connection with the land</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition that traditional Indigenous cultures established knowledge of the land and used many environmental sustainable practices that have been lost through European invasions</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Eco-feminism and criticality</strong></td>
<td>Understanding the connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women, largely from patriarchal structures in society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognising the interplay between the environment and the broader social and political systems which cause exploitation, disadvantage and unequal power relationships</td>
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<tr>
<td>Global perspectives</td>
<td>Understanding social work’s global citizenship responsibilities, including active efforts towards promoting ecological justice worldwide</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition of the contributions made to social work by the Global South, including new perspectives on micro and macro practice and the relationship between them</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Understanding the disproportionate effects of the environmental crisis on the world’s poorest, which are mostly located in the Global South</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition that the behaviours of people in the Global North are largely responsible for causing environmental injustice in the Global South</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Recognition that social work activities and interventions have a local and global impact on people’s lives</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sustainability and degrowth</td>
<td>Conceptualising sustainable development holistically to include ecological justice</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition that ecological resources are finite</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognition that over-consumption and over-production within industrialised and industrialising economies is depleting Earth’s natural resources</td>
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</table>

**Professional knowledge**

Indigenous groups provide a valuable critique of contemporary modernist and positivist knowledges in social work, which the profession would do well to humbly accept and apply to the development of an eco-social model. Indigenous social work authors (Hart, 2015; Baike, 2015) assert that social work has failed to adequately deconstruct and decolonise its modernist roots based on values of individualism, domination and greed. Although many non-Indigenous social workers are sympathetic to the issues associated with colonisation and modernism within the profession, many lack insight into the subtle and institutional colonisation processes taking place within the profession today. Due to a preference for modernist and human-centred
approaches to practice, anything non-Western, such as Indigenous ways of knowing and healing, is often marginalised or considered as secondary sources of knowledge (Coates et al., 2006; Hart, 2015). It is recommended that social workers need to examine the function of white privilege and colonisation within the profession in order to actively decolonise the profession (Bennett, 2015). These critiques provide validation for developing an eco-social model that challenges dominant positivist approaches to practice and accepts a distinct knowledge base that includes valuing Indigenous knowledges.

The concept of well-being is also challenged by Indigenous writers who declare the limitations of individualist and modernist conceptualisations of human well-being to be lacking in spiritual, communal and collective attributes (Hart, 2010; Sterling-Collins, 2015). According to Gamble (2012), the term ‘well-being’ is so embedded into social work at global and local policy levels, such as in the global definition of social work adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW and IASSW, 2014), that a more robust understanding of human wellbeing is needed. Gamble (2012) conceptualises a model for improving well-being in social work, including environmental, social, political and economic dimensions. Hirvilammi and Helne (2014) further challenge the dominant paradigm that associates well-being with an individual’s degree of wealth, highlighting the contradiction this has with environmental sustainability. These authors propose a model that associates sustainability with attributes of having, doing, loving and being. This model challenges dominant conceptualisations of well-being rooted in individual economic prosperity and advocates for a paradigm shift that recognises a form of relational well-being that is environmentally sustainable.

Additionally, eco-feminism also enables social work to examine oppressive political, social and economic structures causing the exploitation of women and nature as part of the profession’s epistemological base (Besthorn and McMillan, 2002). Eco-feminism unites ecological and women’s movements by identifying connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women, largely by patriarchal constructs in society (Warren, 1996). For example, Alston (2013) discusses Bangladeshi women’s reduced capacity to recover from disaster due to patriarchal structures relating to lack of property rights, decision-making opportunities and forced
early marriages. More broadly, critical and anti-oppressive approaches question structural inequalities relating to culture, gender, poverty and the unequal distribution of resources to provide alternative explanations for the environmental crisis (Dominelli, 2012). This critical and anti-oppressive approach considers the structural and political nature of issues relating to the environmental crisis, including the domination and control exerted by powerful groups over the less powerful.

Finally, the challenge for social work is to stay abreast of new developments in the wider domain of research relating to ecology and the environmental crisis, while also integrating this information into professional social work practice. Jones (2013) argues that a truly transformative approach to eco-social work involves ecological knowledge or ‘eco-literacy’ (p. 221). Eco-literacy incorporates knowledge about the interdependent relationships between living organisms, an understanding about how to sustain and promote healthy ecosystems, and an understanding about how human activity has contributed to the environmental crisis. This holistic understanding of the natural world fosters ecological awareness, which views humans as a part of the natural world (Besthorn, 2002). Together, these elements provide a starting point, including some principles, for forming a transformative eco-social model.

**Professional values**

Adopting values within social work relating to sustainability are critical for transformative change within the profession (Gray and Coates, 2015). Sustainable development refers to ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED, 1987, Chapter 2). This definition has been met with much resistance from activists who claim that governments and business groups in the Global North over-emphasise and exploit economic development at the cost of broader issues relevant to sustainability, such as global poverty, social justice and depletion of the natural environment (Blewitt, 2015). Nevertheless, Peeters (2012) provides an in-depth analysis of sustainable development principles, including respect for ecological limits, giving priority to the poor and respect for diversity, which he argues are relevant to social work’s mission.

The concept of de-growth complements sustainability by emphasising a decrease in over-production and over-consumption of goods. De-growth recognises that
economic growth cannot continue forever within a finite environment (Ife, 2013). Degrowth challenges international industrialist and capitalist structures, and assists social work to redress its co-dependency with industrialism.

Social work values that emphasise collectivism are particularly important to the development of an eco-social model. Collectivism is a philosophy that views the group one belongs to as of primary importance and members work cooperatively towards the overall good of the group, as opposed to working to please the self (Ife, 2013). This approach reduces emphasis on individual pursuits, economic imperatives for success and competition, which are shaped by neo-liberal and capitalist structures and critiqued for causing environmental degradation through the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources (Coates, 2003; Ife, 2013). Arguably, many of social work’s individualistic and human-centred values, such as personal acquisitiveness and independence, are at odds with a collective worldview and are at risk of exploiting less powerful groups and living organisms (Gray and Coates, 2015). However, juxtaposed with collective values, such as ecological justice and global citizenship, the need for individual and community well-being can be counter-balanced.

Social work operates in a global community where many of the world’s poorest citizens bear the burden of environmental impacts associated with the damaging effects of privileged industrial societies. For example, the world’s largest mining company, BHP Billiton, caused an oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, resulting in extensive damage to marine and wildlife habitats, local fishing and tourism industries and the death of eleven people (Lakhani, 2015). As Hawkins and Knox (2014) suggest, becoming a global citizen shifts the focus from an individualist perspective to a worldwide perspective, which requires an active effort to campaign against the control of powerful corporations to make the world a more just and humane place. Dominelli (2010) also contends that local actions taken by social workers in the Global North can have deleterious impacts on people living in the Global South, which means the behaviours and decisions social workers make in daily practice, such as a decision to outsource or purchase resources from international markets, may exploit marginalised groups in poorer countries. Social workers therefore have a responsibility to consult disadvantaged groups and ensure they incorporate a collective approach to practice through global and ecological justice perspectives in eco-social practice.
Nevertheless, ‘global’ social work has been criticised for professional imperialism whereby theories and practices originating from the Global North have been inappropriately transferred to the Global South (Midgley, 1981). The different cultural context of social work in the Global North based on individualised notions of human need has in many instances proved to be at odds with local knowledges and community needs in the Global South. Hugman (2010) proposes that, in order to address the challenges associated with international social work, it is important for social work in the Global North to recognise the contributions the Global South make to the development of social work, including an appreciation for diversity and new perspectives about the relationship between micro and macro practice.

In recent years, ecological justice in social work has emerged as an extension to the often-used term environmental justice. Ecological justice describes a deep ecologically centred view of fairness and equality, and acknowledges justice as important to all living organisms within a holistic and interdependent natural world (Melekis and Woodhouse, 2015). Environmental justice is critiqued for representing a more anthropocentric view of justice favouring humans as the centre of natural resources and recipients of its services. While both terms share some common elements, for example the equitable and fair distribution of the world’s natural resources regardless of a person’s income, cultural background and nationality, ecological justice is more radical and challenges contemporary industrialist and consumerist culture that exploits the natural environment (Besthorn, 2013). Committing to ecological justice rather than environmental justice demarcates the difference between implementing transformative change within the profession or simply adding the natural environment to existing practice frameworks.

Doing: practice strategies (outer circle)

The methodological base of eco-social work involves the ‘doing’ of practice and refers to the actions, interventions and strategies used by social workers in everyday interaction with individuals, families and communities. The methodological base should be consistent with the ontological and epistemological foundations and involves personal, individual, group, community and political dimensions of practice (see Figure 2).
When personal beliefs are based in social research and analysis, such as feminism and sustainability, the merging of personal and professional values can strengthen social work practice. Drawing on feminist theory, Pennell and Allen (1984) challenge social work’s tendency to separate the personal and professional self and argue for less demarcation between personal feminist beliefs and professional practice. They contend that the deliberate separation or non-integration of one’s personal feminist beliefs with professional practice can have disastrous results for addressing the oppression of women. Likewise, in a study focused on sustainability, McKinnon (2013) found a divide between personal beliefs and professional behaviours among pro-environmental Australian social workers, partly due to organisational barriers and concerns about imposing their views on individuals.

Figure 2: Dimensions of eco-social practice

McKinnon (2013) argues for congruence between social workers’ pro-environmental beliefs and professional practice, particularly within the context of professional policy changes aimed at promoting sustainability. The integration of personal pro-environmental beliefs with professional practice is consistent with a holistic ontological base reflecting a personal awareness of the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural world.
A reconceptualisation of the concept of well-being as part of the epistemological base of eco-social work has implications for the methodological base, particularly with regard to micro practice. For example, in Hirvilammi and Helne’s (2014) relational model of well-being, ‘having’ is about not only a fair standard of living, but also about the need for natural resources such as clean water and fresh air, and sustainable materials for clothing. ‘Loving’ refers to the sharing of resources and the need for interdependent relationships with other people, communities and nature. ‘Being’ involves personal growth towards self-actualisation, including physical and emotional health, and living in harmony with the natural world. Finally, ‘doing’ involves engaging in responsible activities that promote sustainability, including meaningful employment, education and leisure activities. By reconceptualising well-being to include environmental aspects, practice may be expanded to promote the safety and welfare of individuals and all communities.

While micro-level practice reflecting individualist notions of well-being is emphasised in the Global North, social work in the Global South is often exemplified in macro practice based on cultural worldviews of community cohesion and social harmony. Hugman (2010) outlines the interconnections between micro and macro approaches developed in the Global South, particularly in social development approaches, and argues against the binary division between micro and macro approaches in the Global North. It is crucial for social work in the Global North to learn from and appreciate the knowledge and practice experience of culturally located community-based approaches in the Global South (Hugman, 2010). Eco-social work practice examples in the Global South have been particularly evident in environmental disaster recovery, such as grassroots community reconstruction in rural China (Ku and Ma, 2015) and community capacity building in Thailand (Busapathamrung, 2013). These approaches involve the mobilisation of knowledges and resources embedded in local-level networks, and the participation of local residents and organisations in decision-making processes.

Consideration of the broader systems in society that impact on eco-social practice, including social and political dimensions, is an essential part of transformative change. Drawing from eco-feminism, contemporary social work authors argue that the profession has a responsibility to work towards changing current social, political and
economic structures of modern and industrialist societies, which inadvertently contribute to the exploitation of nature (Bell, 2013; Norton, 2012; Besthorn and McMillen, 2002). In order to advance eco-social practice, Besthorn and McMillen (2002) contend that the profession must ‘return to and significantly expand upon its progressive, activist roots’ (p. 228). Although political dimensions of practice are often neglected in practice due to organisational constraints, it is this level of practice that can have far-reaching effects on ameliorating environmental crisis impacts. This is particularly relevant to eco-social work because environmental disasters and decline have disproportionate impacts on the most disadvantaged citizens in society (Alston, 2013; Dominelli, 2010).

A transformative eco-social approach also involves action at the group and organisational levels of practice. For example, in exploring the strategies of older people who exemplify transformative change towards holistic and sustainable lives, Boetto and Bowles (2017) identified three common themes reflecting a personal, collective and political approach to sustainable living. The collective dimension was concerned with building networks and communities of practice. This theme involved groups of people coming together to share ideas, learn from one another and support each other in their actions towards sustainability. Social work is primarily undertaken within an organisational context and opportunities to challenge organisational activities that compromise environmental care and concern, as well as to promote environmental sustainability are needed (Boetto, 2016). Together, the multidimensional approaches discussed, involving personal, individual, group, community and structural dimensions of practice, represent a way forward for conceptualising the ‘doing’ of eco-social practice. Figure 2 illustrates the interconnected relationship between these dimensions.

Table 2 Eco-social practice strategies

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Eco-social practice strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Personal growth towards connectedness with natural environment</td>
<td>Identify strategies within your household and family to reduce greenhouse gas emissions</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-social practice strategies</td>
<td>Holistic approach to human well-being</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use alternative economic systems for purchasing household needs, e.g. Local Exchange Trading Systems (LETS), local farmers’ markets</td>
<td>Redefine with individuals the characteristics considered important for well-being and quality of life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Undertake volunteer work in local tree-planting projects</td>
<td>Expand access to outdoor space for individuals and families to reduce isolation and improve emotional health</td>
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<td>Engage children, grandchildren or neighbourhood children in sustainable living skills and outdoor leisure activities</td>
<td>Undertake household audits to add positive environmental qualities and to remove environmental hazards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Become a member of an environmental group in your local community</td>
<td>Adopt the use of eco-therapies for addressing problems experienced by individuals and families</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase knowledge and understanding about traditional Indigenous ways of knowing in your local community</td>
<td>Provide guidance and education about practices for sustainable living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Increase knowledge about ecological injustices and the impact on vulnerable groups</td>
<td>Advocate for individuals who experience the direct effects of environmental disaster and decline</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eco-social practice strategies</td>
<td>Increase access to animals and the use of animal assisted therapies</td>
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<tr>
<td>Developing communities</td>
<td>Collaborate with like-minded social workers and other groups within your local community to develop a taskforce for ecosocial practice</td>
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<td>of practice and organisational change</td>
<td>Organise or join a local women’s group for social networking and the sharing of sustainability practices</td>
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<td>Participate in the local permaculture or green group to exchange knowledge and ideas</td>
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<td>Develop partnerships between employing organisations and environmental organisations to facilitate moves towards sustainable practices</td>
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<td>Develop partnerships with women’s services to raise awareness of the gender impacts of climate change</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop partnerships with local food security projects in urban neighbourhoods</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Build alliances with inter-professional groups, including environmental scientists, agriculturalists and environmental planners</td>
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<tr>
<td>Culturally located</td>
<td>Participate in community customs and activities to develop local knowledge and cross-cultural learning about sustainability practices and perspectives</td>
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<tr>
<td>community-based approaches</td>
<td>Identify community needs and sustainability priorities by engaging as equals with local residents, organisations and groups</td>
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### Eco-social practice strategies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social action to facilitate economic and political change</th>
<th>Develop a community-based planning group consisting of local residents and stakeholders to collectively prepare for disaster recovery</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Empower marginalised groups within the community by ensuring their participation and involvement as stakeholders in community planning and development</td>
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<td>Identify local residents and groups with capacity to build sustainability knowledge and skills within the community, e.g. local elders, women</td>
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<td>Facilitate the mobilisation of resources embedded in local level social networks and other place-based groups (e.g. workplaces, church groups) to develop community-based sustainability initiatives</td>
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<td>Work with communities affected by disaster through volunteer or paid employment with organisations that actively engage local residents and organisations</td>
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<td>Facilitate a public meeting in your local community for members interested in ecological sustainability</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Attend local council/county meetings to advocate for the preservation of ‘green’ space in your (and other) local areas</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engage in social media campaigns to promote global ecological justice, including the eradication of human trafficking, new mining developments, child and slave labour and forced marriages</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Support public education campaigns that aim to protect the natural environment, including deforestation, decreased mining, use of renewable energy sources</td>
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</table>
Eco-social practice strategies

- Become an ‘ally’ (Fejo-King, 2014) for Indigenous movements and lobby for human rights and greater political participation of Indigenous populations
- Organise collective social action and advocacy groups for people who share similar environmental disadvantages, e.g. women
- Organise local community responses to global events related to sustainability, such as United Nations Climate Conferences and G20 Summits

Acknowledging the inter-dependence between personal, individual, collective, community and political dimensions of eco-social practice provides the opportunity for social workers to identify a range of strategies conducive to transformative change within the profession and broader society. While some progress in developing strategies is already evident (see e.g. Gray et al., 2013; Norton, 2012), the integration of being, thinking and doing, together with examples of good practice, is still needed. Table 2 provides a collection of examples illustrating how social workers may be able to engage in personal, individual, collective, community and political activities aimed at transformative eco-social change. The examples may overlap across multiple dimensions, reflecting the interconnected relationship between different levels of practice.

Discussion

One of the most confronting challenges for social work in moving forward with transformative eco-social change is acknowledging that the profession’s ontological foundations, based on modernist assumptions, are incongruent with an eco-social approach that aims to protect the natural environment. An eco-social approach recognises that the social work profession was born out of industrialist and capitalist roots, such as by growing alongside nationalist welfare states that support capitalist
endeavours (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). This has resulted in the inherent assumption within social work that humans govern the natural world, rather than being interdependent with the natural world (Coates, 2005), and presents an incongruency with professional transformative change taking place.

Education is the conduit for advancing transformative change within social work and requires a fundamental reorientation of the philosophical base, including ontological, epistemological and methodological aspects. While this paradigmatic shift challenges both students and teachers, transformative learning and perspective transformation (Mezirow, 1978) provide a way forward for developing a different frame of reference for understanding Earth as a holistic entity and for taking action towards a more sustainable environment. Yet, even a basic integration of the natural environment in social work education is arguably still in the development phase. According to Jones’s (2013) content analysis of online curricula from twenty-seven Australian social work courses, there is little evidence of the inclusion of the natural environment or sustainability in curriculum content apart from four universities offering a subject with specific reference to environmental sustainability. This indicates the need for a systemic approach to developing social work education in order to reconceptualise the natural environment with foundational social work knowledge areas.

While acknowledging the movement in social work towards recognition of the natural environment at both international and national policy levels (see e.g. IFSW, IASSW and ICSW, 2012), it is worth noting the oversights that are also occurring within the profession. One example of overlooking the natural environment as a core concern to social work is the newly developed international definition of social work. This new definition essentially removed reference to the ‘environment’ and replaced it with ‘structures’ (IFSW and IASSW, 2014). While the term ‘environment’ may be interpreted to mean the natural as well as the social environment, the term ‘structure’ is not as adaptable to such an interpretation. This change can be viewed as a regressive move from the standpoint of social workers concerned about the inequitable impact of the environmental crisis on the world’s poorest citizens (Bowles et al., 2016).
Social work in the Global North is primarily undertaken within an organisational context, whereby social workers are dependent upon human service organisations for employment, resources and a client base (Healy, 2014). The organisational context of social work practice entrenched in neo-liberal and managerialist notions of welfare may create barriers for social workers interested in changing their conventional practice base. Welfare organisations are increasingly constrained by reduced resources and funding, which may ultimately reduce the capacity of social workers to practice in an ecologically mindful way. However, this practice reality is not dissimilar to other practice challenges encountered by social workers that relate to fulfilling the profession’s ethical commitments. By understanding the influence of conservative economic ideology on human service organisations, social workers can begin to develop practice strategies that address challenges and create opportunities for eco-social practice.

Conclusion

This paper attempts to disrupt the dominant modernist paradigm by constructing a transformative eco-social model for practice emphasising a consistent ontological, epistemological and methodological base. Although it is acknowledged a paradigm shift such as this requires the collective efforts of social work scholars and practitioners, this model for practice represents a starting point for contributing to transformative change and addressing the profession’s paradox of inherent modernist roots which contradict the philosophical base of practice. By adopting a distinct philosophical base incorporating sustainability, holism and interdependence, a transformative eco-social model respects Indigenous and Global South perspectives, and recognises that ecological resources are finite. The meaning of well-being is reconceptualised to include sustainable and relational attributes. Finally, the ‘doing’ of eco-social work requires an emphasis on activism within the profession, and attention to personal, individual, collective, community and political dimensions of practice. Such a paradigmatic shift offers alternative conceptualisations to existing modernist and human-centred approaches in social work, which encourage transformative change towards a more sustainable world.
References


Conclusion

This chapter presented the nine publications in full-text, including seven journal articles and two book chapters. Each publication represents aspects of eco-social work, including elements such as global citizenship, professional ethics and gender. Together, these publications identify key themes and issues relevant to the overall research objectives in this thesis.
Chapter 5: Discussion and conclusion

Introduction

This chapter summarises key findings in relation to the research objectives, including: strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in education; strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in professional practice; and key concepts and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work. Each research objective will be discussed in conjunction with key findings from the publications that most correspond with the topic of the research objective; that is, education, practice or the conceptualisation of ecosocial work. For example, the publication exploring field education relates to the research objective aimed at exploring strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work education.

For the purposes of drawing together the findings of the nine publications, Publications 1 - 4 will be considered in relation to the first research objective (education). Findings from Publications 5 - 8 will be discussed in relation to the second research objective (practice). The final publication (Publication 9) stands alone in addressing the third research objective (conceptualisation of ecosocial work), as it integrates knowledge gained from the previous eight publications.

Although each publication will be discussed in the context of a corresponding research objective, it is acknowledged that this type of compartmentalising could undermine the holistic integrity of the thesis. For example, the publication exploring professional ethics (Publication 4) is relevant to exploring strategies for education (Research objective 1) and professional practice (Research objective two), as well as the conceptualisation of ecosocial work (Research objective three). Indeed, the relationships between education, practice and the conceptualisation of ecosocial work should be viewed as interdependent with each other. In particular, the separation of education and practice could serve to remove responsibility from those who specialise in one area; for example, education, to consider implications in other areas of social work, such as practice. This postmodernist analysis deconstructs education and practice discourses in social work, and replaces them with a more flexible and relational understanding. While the value of postmodernism is contested within social
work, it is useful for breaking down modernist constructions and dualisms (Healy, 2014), particularly those associated with professional language and categories such as education and practice. While awareness of these issues is important, grouping the publications according to their association with a research objective provides a framework for drawing together the key findings of this thesis across the nine publications. I have therefore endeavoured to allocate each publication according to the ‘most’ relevant research objective, while recognising the interdependence between each one.

**Research objective 1: Strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work education**

The first research objective aimed to explore strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work education. Several educational strategies were examined as part of this research objective, including an international study abroad program (Publication 1), online education (Publication 2) and field education (Publication 3). Further, professional ethics, which informs social work education, is discussed in relation to this research objective (Publication 4). Although professional ethics are equally important to social work practice, education is acknowledged as a vehicle for informing students, and future practitioners, about values relating to environmental sustainability. In response to the research question, ‘what strategies can be explored to enhance an ecologically centred approach in social work education?’ this section discusses key findings of each of the four publications, highlighting the significance of knowledge gained for social work education against the context of current literature.

**International study abroad program**

*Summary of key findings*

Outcomes of the research (Publication 1) indicated that student perceptions of the environment as a result of participating in the study abroad program were expanded beyond a sociocultural perspective to include aspects of the natural environment. Guided critical reflective workshops enabled students to: share experiences, reflect on personal assumptions (Fook, 2012), and develop an understanding about the global
dimensions of environmental degradation. For example, students made connections between local and global aspects of climate change, and were encouraged to consider grass-roots and community development approaches to addressing environmental problems in practice, rather than individualist notions of welfare emphasised in Australia. However, it is not known whether positive impacts of the short-term program were maintained for students over an extended period. Additionally, the overlay of Euro-Western ideology, privilege and power are key criticisms of study abroad programs (Webhi, 2009), and the evaluation did not assess whether the positive learning experience was reciprocated in some positive way with people in the host community. Nevertheless, efforts were made to reduce these shortcomings through reflective workshops aimed at developing student ‘self’ awareness and culturally sensitive practice.

**Significance of knowledge gained**

International field experiences are an established part of many schools of social work, and provide the opportunity to broaden students’ perspectives on a range of issues, including cultural diversity, global citizenship and core social work values (Bell & Anscombe, 2012; Healy, 2008). In Australia, government initiatives such as the Endeavour Mobility Grants ([www.internationaleducation.gov.au](http://www.internationaleducation.gov.au)) and the New Colombo Plan ([www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan](http://www.dfat.gov.au/people-to-people/new-colombo-plan)), have aimed to increase student opportunities for international study experiences through funding and scholarships. Despite this potential for increased overseas experiences, there is limited social work research that specifically explores the learning potential for integrating environmental sustainability and the natural environment into study abroad programs. Although related aspects have been explored, such as critical reflection (Kreitzer, Barlow, Schwartz, Lacroix & Macdonald, 2012) and cultural competency (Gilin & Young, 2009), the research in this thesis provides a distinct focus on student learning in relation to the natural environment, sustainability and climate change in an international context.
Online education program

Summary of key findings

Outcomes of the research (Publication 2) indicated that the online learning program for students was valuable for developing student knowledge about environmental sustainability. Educational benefits for student learning occurred in areas of gender oppression, water quality, and cost of carbon emissions and the impact of local actions on the global community. However, gaps in student knowledge were identified with regard to theory, gender roles, Euro-centrism and cultural privilege. These gaps indicate that the brevity of the program may not have allowed adequate time for deconstruction of long-held assumptions within a critical reflective process.

Additionally, concerns about online learning more generally have recognised that “passive approaches” to learning among students can inhibit deep learning processes (Brown, Keppell, Hughes, Hard & Smith, 2013, p. 65), which may be compounded by isolation and lack of human interaction with the instructor (Loh, Wong, Quazi & Kingshott, 2016). Nevertheless, as a voluntary program, students were likely to be motivated towards learning about the topic of environmental sustainability. Students engaged more actively in workshop topics that provided visual or interactive stimuli, suggesting that a range of experiential online learning activities is required to engage students in a meaningful way. Foundations for a transformative approach to developing an ecologically informed curriculum were developed based on aspects relating to global citizenship, including empathy/concern, knowledge/literacy, and action/responsibility.

Significance of knowledge gained

Although distance education has an established history in Australian social work (Jones, 2010b), there is limited research about the online learning potential regarding environmental sustainability. Developments in technology have been coupled with a move towards flexible delivery and blended learning approaches in tertiary education, which have increased the use of a range of technologies to complement face-to-face teaching (Kehrwald & McCallum, 2015; Palmer, 2011). Therefore, technology and online learning are central components to advancing an ecologically centred approach in social work curricula for both on-campus and off-campus courses. Yet research
about the use of online learning to develop knowledge about an ecologically centred approach is limited. One research example found in the (English language) literature refers to the use of online tools as part of an on-campus course for exploring global issues relating to ecosocial work (des Marais, Bexell & Bhadra, 2016). These tools consisted of self-evaluations and/or quizzes about slavery (www.slaveryfootprint.org) and personal carbon footprints (www.footprint.wwf.org.uk). The research in this thesis provides a distinct focus for using online learning as a major tool for developing an ecologically centred approach in social work education.

Field education

**Summary of key findings**

Key findings of the research (Publication 3) suggested that experience in field education enhanced student learning about the complex relationship between food insecurity, climate change and vulnerability. In particular, students were able to apply existing social work theory to practice and develop a social work role for addressing food security issues within the agency and wider community. Through participation in experiential activities, students were provided with the opportunity to understand issues and develop strategies for working at the micro, meso and macro levels of practice. A critical reflective process enabled students to identify unsettling experiences, reflect on personal assumptions and alternative beliefs, and develop new ways of thinking (Fook & Gardner, 2007). Although this field education encounter provided a positive learning experience, it represented a ‘one-off’ learning opportunity for two students who had nominated their interest in the area, and therefore did not capture the experiences of other students.

**Significance of knowledge gained**

Field education offers social work students the opportunity to integrate theoretical knowledge gained throughout their learning into the practice context and represents a compulsory feature of social work education in Australia (Cleak & Wilson, 2013). Thus, field education is central to social work education and represents a critical component for developing knowledge and skills relating to ecosocial work. Social work research has indicated the need for increased ecosocial work opportunities in field education...
(Drolet, Wu, Taylor & Dennehy, 2015; Kaiser, Himmelheber, Miller & Hayward, 2015; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015), and the need for updated education standards and guidelines used to enhance student learning in field education (Crawford et al., 2015). The research in this thesis builds on this knowledge by offering an in-depth case study analysis, involving reflections of both field educators and social work students.

**Professional ethics**

**Summary of key findings**

A content analysis of three national codes of ethics in the United Kingdom, United States of America and Australia (Publication 4) revealed that overall, the three codes did not include concern for environmental sustainability as a core element. Australia was a possible exception with its code referring explicitly to the natural environment five times. Further, an examination of the IFSW policy context revealed a fragmentary and piecemeal approach to environmental sustainability content. In particular, it was argued that changes to the IFSW definition of social work, which is influential in framing national codes of ethics, have inhibited the progress of an ecologically centred approach by removing the word ‘environment’ and replacing it with ‘structures’ – a word not as amenable to consideration of the natural environment. As a global organisation with responsibilities relating to representation and leadership within the profession and for guiding national policies, the extent to which environmental sustainability is acknowledged in international ethical documents has implications for the development of an ecologically centred approach within nations. These findings suggest that a thorough examination of professional ethics, including the definition of social work, which provides a framework for developing policy documents, is needed to appropriately prioritise sustainability and the natural environment in social work education and professional practice.

**Significance of knowledge gained**

Professional codes of ethics, which articulate the definition of social work and corresponding values, contribute to the development of an identity for social workers – that is, what it means to ‘be’ a social worker, including aspects relating to the worldviews, beliefs and attitudes of the practitioner. The Australian Social Work
Education and Accreditation Standards (2012) begin with the definition of social work as defined by the IFSW. This definition provides a framework and structure for developing the education standards. The importance of values is also highlighted within the standards, stating that education is “informed by core values” and “combines attributes of being, thinking and doing” (AASW, 2012, p. 9). The definition of social work and professional values therefore are foundational for developing social work education, and reflect the profession’s ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) perspectives in education. This research examined the presence of pro-environmental values in professional codes of ethics, as a vehicle for preparing social work students to becoming informed and active practitioners. As noted, this research has implications for ecosocial work practice (Research objective two) and the conceptualisation of ecosocial work (Research objective three).

**Implications for social work education**

While the education strategies explored – a study abroad program, online learning and field education – were shown to have enriched student learning about aspects relating to environmental sustainability, each strategy represented an opportunity made available to a small number of students in the social work program. These students most likely had a personal awareness and interest in the topic area of environmental sustainability. In this sense, the research represents an ad hoc approach to ecosocial work education, which if applied in the long-term could maintain ecosocial work as peripheral to mainstream education and on the margins of social work practice. Rather, ecosocial work education more broadly requires a transformative approach, involving the challenging of fixed assumptions that separate humanity from the natural world towards a reconceptualisation of humans as a holistic part of the natural world (Gray & Coates, 2015). To facilitate transformative change in social work education, fundamental changes to professional ethics, policy and curricula are needed to enable a universal understanding of the environmental crisis and associated inequalities upon humans and nonhuman species. The development of skills for practice is integral to this transformative approach in education, which requires social workers to take a stance towards finding solutions to address ecological and social problems.
Several pedagogical approaches for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work education have been suggested. For example, Jones (2013) refers to three approaches: the “bolt-on approach”; “embedded approach”; and “transformative approach” (pp. 217–220). Each approach represents a higher order of integration, and while all approaches offer worthy modifications, the transformative approach requires a substantial shift in orientation about the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural environment. Each individually explored strategy in this thesis reflected a bolt-on approach, which focused on adding content relating to ecological sustainability in the existing curriculum. Linked together in the curriculum these strategies would reflect an embedded approach, which permeates ecological sustainability throughout the existing curriculum. However, several authors, including Jones (2010a, 2013), Gray & Coates (2015) and Phillip and Reisch (2015) have suggested that simply adding environmental content to curricula reinforces the dominant modernist paradigm, which invariably contributes to the exploitation of the natural environment.

Rather, a transformative approach to enhancing an ecosocial work approach in education encompasses a paradigmatic shift in orientation about the place of humans in the natural world (Gray & Coates, 2015). This shift involves a move away from social work’s ideological assumptions that separate humans from the natural environment towards an acknowledgment that humans are a holistic and interdependent part of the natural world (Gray & Coates, 2015). A transformative approach in education has wider implications for social work, and suggests a complete overhaul of long-held philosophical assumptions within the profession. Social work authors, such as Bell (2013) and Besthorn (2012) have highlighted inconsistencies between social work’s conventional philosophical base, and developing an environmentally sustainable profession and society. Gray and Coates (2015) suggest the need for alternative values, including sustainability, de-growth, conservation, diversity and restoration. This position warrants openness towards the reworking of professional ethics which are conducive to understanding Earth as a holistic entity, and which cultivate interconnectedness between humans and the natural world.

Although the profession has moved to acknowledge environmental sustainability as a component of professional ethics, these changes have not been holistic or
transformative. For example, given that the AASW Code of Ethics makes significant mention of environmental sustainability and informs all other national documents, it would be expected that associated policy documents would reflect these principles outlined in the code. Yet, the AASW Practice Standards (AASW, 2013) used in field education to evaluate student progress with regard to practice skills, does not contain learning goals relating to environmental sustainability (Crawford et al., 2015). Moreover, the acknowledgement of environmental sustainability in the code of ethics sits within a human-centred understanding of social justice. Besthorn (2012) identifies the philosophical assumptions underpinning social justice as being anthropocentric and therefore incompatible with the holistic attributes of an ecologically centred approach. Unless professional ethics, which informs social work education, is reworked to incorporate a holistic understanding of environmental sustainability and is appropriately prioritised, then education standards used to guide student learning will not be satisfactorily implemented.

Drawing from Mezirow’s (1978) transformative learning theory, the process of perspective transformation provides a means for how the profession can transition from a modernist to a holistic perspective of the natural world (Jones, 2010a, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2015; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). Transformative learning theory challenges fixed assumptions or frames of references, which are acquired uncritically through processes of socialisation. For social work this involves acknowledging that the profession was formed during the modernist movement of the 19th and 20th centuries (Ferreira, 2010; Webb, 2007). Consequently, attitudinal shifts of the time, including individualism and independence, were unconsciously embraced as part of early social work approaches, which are now philosophically at odds with an ecosocial approach aimed at environmental sustainability. Following an acknowledgment of inherent modernist beliefs, the profession needs to question, revise and redefine core beliefs as part of professional ethics, and then make parallel changes across policy documents.

To complement transformative learning theory, a guided process of critical reflexivity is essential for deconstructing individual students’ worldviews and long-held assumptions which might impede learning about complex issues associated with ecosocial work (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). As individuals, it is important to examine the beliefs and assumptions gained through socialisation
processes within contemporary modernist society. Understanding the influence of ‘self’ is fundamental to developing transformative change in beliefs and attitudes (Bay & Macfarlane, 2011; Connolly & Harms, 2013). Drawing from aspects of critical reflexivity, ecosocial work authors suggest a range of related processes for challenging long-held assumptions of students, including critical reflexive development (des Marais et al., 2016), critical and structural analysis (Jones, 2013), consciousness raising (Teixeria & Krings, 2015), and connecting individual and political issues (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). At a time when social work practitioners report having a great number of clients facing environmental injustices (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015), it is important that critical reflexive skills be developed as part of education to prepare students for professional ecosocial work practice.

**Research objective 2: Strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in social work practice**

The second research objective explored strategies for enhancing an ecologically centred approach in professional practice. Several strategies were examined as part of this research objective through the exploration of: the impacts of climate change on rural women (Publications 5 and 6); sustainable living solutions of older people (Publication 7); and micro level practice, or work with individuals and families (Publication 8). The first three publications mentioned above (Publications 5, 6 and 7) will be discussed collectively, since these indicated the multidimensional nature of an ecologically centred approach in practice. The latter publication (Publication 8) is a theoretical conceptualisation about micro level practice, and will be discussed separately. In response to the research question, ‘what strategies can be explored to enhance an ecologically centred approach in social work practice?’, this section summarises key findings and highlights the significance of knowledge gained for professional practice within the context of current literature.

**Multidimensional practice**

**Summary of key findings**

Key findings from the research exploring the impacts of climate change on rural women (Publication 5) suggested that the effects of climate change on vulnerable
groups, such as rural women, are becoming increasingly relevant to social work practice. Impacts of climate change experienced by women were reported to consist of increased hardship; for example, in response to climate variability, increased responsibilities pertaining to pro-environmental household roles, and the increased vulnerability of women in crisis. A range of practice strategies were identified across the micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (community) levels of practice. At the micro level, strategies relate to addressing salient issues for women in crisis such as in response to natural disasters, and developing resilience; for example, the provision of energy efficient household utilities. Meso strategies involved developing gender-sensitive organisational policies, as well as networking and educational opportunities. Macro strategies were directed towards social, cultural and political change; for example, challenging dominant gender roles and opposing consumerism targeted towards women. Also, political change that focuses on macro issues, rather than individual behaviour modification was identified as an important strategy for addressing patriarchal social structures. These key findings reflect a multidimensional and critical approach to practice.

Outcomes from the systematic review (Publication 6) about the effects of climate change on Australian rural women indicated that women and men adapt to climatic events, such as drought, in different ways. Although the negative experiences of rural men were noted, key findings of the research highlighted that rural women are particularly disadvantaged at all levels. At the macro level, the patriarchal make-up of rural lifestyle and the comparative lack of power experienced by women placed them at particular risk; for example, through lack of decision-making power regarding the family business, and lack of representation of women on rural agricultural boards. At the meso level, the need for organisations to be responsive to gendered differences in rural locations and to be aware of the strain experienced by women was deemed critical. At the micro level, women were identified as protectors of their family’s health and primarily responsible for rebuilding the community’s social infrastructure, yet they tended to neglect their own health. Additionally, women were more likely than men to gain off-farm employment to cover household costs, which resulted in multiple issues at all levels of practice. For example, off-farm work increased workload for women, whose household and farm tasks were often not reduced as a result of this off-farm
employment. The disadvantage experienced in off-farm employment was identified; for example, as a result of casual employment and lack of employee rights. These key findings highlighted the need for an anti-essentialist feminist approach (Butler & Scott, 1992), which recognises the differences experienced by rural women, who encounter unique challenges relating to aspects of rural lifestyle compared to their metropolitan counterparts.

Outcomes from the study exploring the sustainable living practices of older people identified a range of solutions (Publication 7). These solutions had been developed over many years in line with a personal commitment to sustainability values, including anticonsumerism, a connection with the land, and the importance of family. Sustainable living solutions included subsistence living techniques, alternative economic systems, large infrastructure modifications, networking within groups, alternative transport options, and political participation and action. By drawing together the themes from the findings, elements for ecosocial transformative change in social work practice emerged, grouped into three levels: the individual level of nurturing personal and family growth towards a meaningful connectedness with the natural environment; networks and communities of practice involving groups of people who share collective learning and support each other in their goals towards sustainability; and, fostering activities at the broader level of society to facilitate social, political and cultural change. These elements reflect social work’s critical approach to practice, involving a multidimensional approach to environmental sustainability at micro (individual), meso (group) and macro (community) levels.

**Significance of knowledge gained**

While awareness about environmental issues in social work practice is growing, this awareness is more conceptual than empirical (Crawford et al., 2015). Many practice approaches have been conceptualised in broad-based notions premised on social work values and theory (see, for example, Dominelli, 2013; Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2012). Other practice approaches have been developed through the analysis of a variety of case studies (see, for example, Ku & Ma, 2015; Larson, Drolet & Samuel, 2015; Norton, Holguin & Maros, 2013; Polack, Wood & Smith, 2010), yet little empirical research has been undertaken about how to translate this conceptual and case-based knowledge.
into practice approaches that are applicable across a range of practice contexts. The strategies examined in this research build on current knowledge by undertaking empirical research with two prospective stakeholder groups in the profession: women activists and practitioners employed by women’s services (Publication 5); and older people who strive to live sustainable lifestyles (Publication 7). The systematic review (Publication 6), although not empirical, builds on this research by synthesising literature with regard to the unique challenges experienced by rural women. Key findings of these studies were applied to social work practice and revealed the need for a multidimensional and critical approach in ecosocial work practice.

**Micro level practice**

**Summary of key findings**

The micro level practice framework (Publication 8) outlined ecologically centred approaches for integrating theory with micro level practice, including strategies for day-to-day interaction with individuals and families. Drawing from critical theory, two key considerations were developed to promote sustainability and environmental justice, and increase exposure to the natural environment. Posed as questions, these considerations were: *as part of practice, how can we promote sustainability of the environment and address disproportionate impacts of environmental disasters and decline? And, how can we incorporate the natural environment as part of day-to-day practice?* These questions were used as a lens and applied to theoretical practice processes and methods: the process of the helping relationship; and multidimensional methods (micro, meso and macro dimensions) of practice. Specific strategies and case scenarios were developed to provide examples and demonstrate how the natural environment can be integrated into practice.

**Significance of knowledge gained**

Although micro level practice has been discussed in ecosocial work literature; for example, wilderness therapy (Besthorn, 2002) and animal assisted therapy (Evans & Gray, 2012), much of the emerging literature and knowledge base for ecosocial work practice recognises an environmentally aware form of practice at the macro level; for example, in social policy and community development (see, for example, Besthorn,
A recent study that interviewed social work students in the United States suggested that students planning to focus on macro practice were more likely to enrol in environmental justice courses and more likely to undertake environmental activities in their personal lives, compared to students interested in micro practice (Miller & Hayward, 2014). Yet the micro level of practice, often referred to as social care, casework or direct practice, involving work with individuals and families, is a major form of social work especially in Euro-Western nations where the notion of an individualised form of welfare is emphasised. This research conceptualised strategies for micro level practice to address this gap and develop a way forward for practitioners employed in direct practice across a range of contexts, to engage in ecosocial work practice.

**Implications for social work practice**

While the strategies presented above contribute to the development of an ecologically centred approach in practice, they do not consider the profession’s philosophical base. In other words, the practice strategies do not address the profession’s inherent modernist roots that are critiqued for contributing to the environmental crisis (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). While practice is about ‘doing’ and undertaking action, the methodology of practice should be examined in the context of its underpinning assumptions. Indeed, as with research (Scotland, 2012; Staller, 2012), all practice methodologies can be traced back to their underlying philosophical assumptions (Aymer & Okitikpi, 2000). This understanding suggests that how practitioners ‘do’ ecosocial work practice will be different to conventional approaches if the profession’s modernist assumptions are challenged and reworked. Alternatively, if social workers continue to function within the profession’s existing frame of reference, then fundamentally the way of doing things will not change and the effectiveness of ecosocial work practice is questionable. Creating change at the methodological level of social work alone therefore is arguably shallow and superficial and constrains ecosocial work to the margins of professional discourse.

Social work transformation requires a more introspective and deep-rooted approach to practice that includes consideration of underpinning philosophical assumptions. Aymer and Okitikpi (2000) argue that social work’s orientation towards
action has lacked deeper level reflection, which they contend places practitioners at risk of floundering with the constant change and fluidity of contemporary work environments. Rather, they argue for self-directed and ‘thinking’ practitioners who understand basic first principles and the interconnectedness between ontology, epistemology and methodology. This more reflective approach enables practitioners to make decisions based on intellectual rigour, and is independent from dominant discourses in the government and welfare sectors. Applied to ecosocial work practice, this means knowing how to reflect, adapt and be accountable for promoting ecosocial change that is independent from the prevailing economic growth model. Without such rigour, social workers are “effectively colluding in oppression” by implicitly relying on an inappropriate ontological base that reinforces oppressive hierarchies that cause climate change (Bell, 2013, p. 55).

The suggested paradigmatic shift introduces a dilemma concerned with how deeply the profession is willing to undertake transformative change in order to reconcile instances of incongruity with its modernist philosophical base. This dilemma acknowledges that creating change at the practice or action level of social work alone is shallow and superficial, and constrains ecosocial work to the margins of professional discourse. Such a paradigmatic shift questions whether social work should abandon efforts towards transformative change until the profession is able to re-articulate the underlying assumptions needed to formulate a philosophical base consistent with the holistic attributes of ecosocial work. However, a movement towards adopting ecosocial work as a philosophical foundation for the profession involves incremental changes in the first instance, while at the same time developing distinct and foundational changes to the profession’s underpinning assumptions and beliefs. Although the extent of effectiveness of these strategies in an organisational context that is embedded within the capitalist welfare system may be questionable, it should not deter social work’s collective efforts to challenge the economic model dominating both the social work profession and its societal context. The identified objective for social work is to continue the momentum for progressing change and to develop collective action as a profession.

Although the profession has moved to acknowledge environmental sustainability as a component of ethical practice (AASW, 2010; IFSW, IASSW & ICSW, 2012), many
practitioners graduated prior to these changes taking place. Therefore it is critical that current practitioners have the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in ecosocial work, particularly with regard to the application of theory to practice. As part of professional membership requirements in some nations, Continuing Professional Development (CPD) obligations may provide an opportunity for practitioners to develop knowledge and skills in ecosocial work. For example, as an accredited member of the AASW, practitioners are required to undertake a total of 30 hours in professional development activities (AASW, 2015). In order to outreach to social work practitioners across the nation, an organised approach for delivery of this professional development opportunity is required.

**Research objective 3: Key elements and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work**

The purpose of the third research objective was to identify key elements and associated issues that distinguish and conceptualise an ecosocial work approach. In response to the research question, ‘what are the key elements and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work?’ this section summarises characteristics central to ecosocial work, as well as concerns that impede the development of ecosocial work. Key elements include: holism with the natural world; criticality and ecofeminism; Indigenous perspectives; global perspectives; sustainability and degrowth; and ecoliteracy.

Further to identifying key elements and associated issues, a transformative ecosocial model (Publication 9) was developed as the culmination of this thesis. Although the original purpose of this research objective was not fundamentally aimed at developing an ecosocial model, the contradiction posed by an inconsistent philosophical base called for a more robust response than simply a list of elements. By synthesising social work literature in conjunction with key findings from this thesis, a consistent philosophical base for ecosocial work was proposed as a starting point for further development of ecosocial work within the profession. The transformative ecosocial model identifies characteristics foundational to ecosocial work across ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of practice. By endeavouring to disrupt the modernist paradigm, this model advances transformative
ecosocial change within the profession. Following a summary of the key elements and associated issues in the conceptualisation of ecosocial work (emerging from Publications 1-8), the transformative ecosocial model (Publication 9) is discussed as the culminating feature of this thesis. Implications for social work as a result of these findings are then considered in the context of current literature.

**Holism with the natural world**

Central to ecosocial work is an understanding that Earth is a holistic entity composed of interconnections between living organisms, including humans and nonhuman species (Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2015). This holistic understanding acknowledges the well-being of humans as fundamentally linked with the natural environment, which contrasts with the profession’s inherent modernist view that the natural environment is an objective entity, independent and separate from humans (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013). Drawing from several theories, social work authors have endeavoured to develop a more holistic paradigm that acknowledges the interdependence between humans and the natural world. For example, deep ecology promotes a deeply experiential connection with the natural world and understands the self as universally belonging to a larger cosmos (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Besthorn, 2012; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). Similarly, elements of biophilia, which understand humans as having an innate and genetically determined affiliation with the natural world, have been adopted as an alternative to social work’s conventional perspective of the natural world (Besthorn & Saleeby, 2003; Heinsch, 2012; Lysack, 2010). Closely associated with these perspectives are ecospiritual approaches, which conceptualise humanity’s relationship with the natural world as being deeply spiritual (Jones, 2013). Ferreira (2010) contends that spirituality will become increasingly important in ecosocial work, identifying two main roles for social workers: inner transformation involving a shift in worldview from human centredness to Earth centredness of the social worker; and interconnectedness, which involves expressing the social worker’s inner transformation in the helping relationship with other people. Other approaches that shape a holistic view of Earth include the Gaia hypothesis (Jones, 2013), cosmogenesis (Coates, 2005), Indigenous perspectives (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006; Zapf, 2009), and aspects of Eastern and Western religions (Besthorn, 2012).
Each perspective emphasising holism with the natural world has its own set of complexities and areas of critique. For example, despite the assumption in deep ecology that humans are as one with the natural world, deep ecology is critiqued for its sometimes anthropocentric approach to solutions; for example, by proposing human-centred preservation, rather than nature-centred preservation (Cudworth, 2003). Deep ecology is also critiqued for assuming that all humans are responsible for environmental problems, rather than acknowledging social divisions and power relationships between humans that cause misuse of the natural environment and social inequality (Plumwood, 1993; Salleh, 1984). Likewise, despite social work’s early involvement with Christian charity organisations in parts of Europe during the 1800s (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2015), the adoption of Western or Eastern ecospiritual perspectives challenges the predominantly secular and nonspiritual nature of contemporary social work. Nevertheless, according to several authors, these holistic perspectives have value and provide insight for developing ecosocial work (for example Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Besthorn, 2012; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015).

Holism with the natural world also implies that other human centred concepts within social work need retheorising. For example, human well-being is a central concept embedded in social work at global and national policy levels, including the international definition of social work (IFSW & IASSW, 2014). However, a more detailed understanding of human well-being is needed to determine the scope of concern for nonhuman species, which may be placed at risk in the pursuit of human development. Gamble (2012) proposes a holistic model by conceptualising well-being as including environmental, social, political and economic dimensions. Further, Helne and Hirvilammi (2017) challenge the dominant economic paradigm that associates well-being with economic prosperity and draw from sociologist, Erik Allardt, to advocate for a relational and sustainable conceptualisation of well-being, including attributes of being, loving, doing and having. These developments toward a more holistic understanding for well-being are a valuable contribution to ecosocial work. Nevertheless, it should be noted that despite a more holistic perspective of well-being, these approaches focus on humans as the centre of need and neglect consideration of the well-being of nonhuman species. Efforts to incorporate the recognition of
nonhuman species could further a holistic understanding of well-being in ecosocial work.

**Criticality and ecofeminism**

Ecofeminism is of particular significance for conceptualising ecosocial work, combining both green and feminist theories to explain the ecological crisis (Cudworth, 2003). Ecofeminist authors expose patriarchal structures as the common source of environmental and social problems and critique the male-domination of scientific knowledge as objectifying both women and the natural environment (see for example, Datar, 2011; Nhanenge, 2011; Shiva, 2010). Ecofeminist authors emphasise the effects of dominant institutions on women and the environment, including Western colonisation (Shiva, 2010), capitalism, and the gendered division of labour (Merchant, 1992). For example, Alston (2013) discusses Bangladeshi women’s reduced capacity to recover from disaster due to patriarchal structures relating to lack of property rights, decision-making opportunities and forced early marriages. More broadly, critical approaches provide a structural analysis of culture, gender, poverty and the unequal distribution of resources, including the domination of powerful institutions and groups within society that influence or perpetuate social and ecological injustice (Jones, 2013).

However, critical approaches are associated with underpinning modernist assumptions which contradict values relating to environmental sustainability. According to Mullaly (2007), structural social work is concerned with the social, cultural, economic and political dimensions of society, which exclude people from opportunities and meaningful participation in society. Often conceptualised in economic terms, such as stable employment and/or income, increasing participation in society can unwittingly support capitalism, which is considered a contributing cause of climate change (Ferreira, 2010). Moreover, the concept of power in social work is also underpinned by modernist Euro-Western assumptions, involving the role of individual social workers who endeavour to empower disadvantaged individuals. Pease (2002) argues that this modernist conceptualisation of power places social workers in a dominant position and develops a dualism of powerful-powerless, which can cause unintended oppressive consequences. Applied to ecosocial work, this modernist conceptualisation of power is in danger of perpetuating cultural bias towards Euro-
Western perspectives embedded in social work, which inadvertently contribute to climate change. Further, while critical approaches emphasise structural injustices in society, they tend to overlook the interdependent relationship between humans and the natural environment, therefore neglecting to acknowledge the ecological injustices imposed upon nonhuman species.

Arguably, the above critique undermines the importance of structural change, the political nature of climate change, and consequential effect on disadvantaged citizens. Indeed, this critique paradoxically serves to pardon major players, such as multinational corporations and patriarchal social and economic systems which contribute to the cause of climate change. Despite the above critiques, ecosocial work authors advocate for the need of structural change with regard to a range of issues, including: the ecological and social damage caused by mining companies (Ross, 2013); culturally sensitive approaches of humanitarian aid organisations (Dominelli, 2015); fossil fuel dependency (Polack, et al., 2010); social change activism (Shepard, 2012, 2017); disaster recovery (Alston, 2013; Dominelli, 2015); food security (Phillips, 2009; Silvasti, 2015) and rurality (Alston, 2007; 2010, 2012). Other ecosocial work authors have applied critical social work theory more generally to the development of an ecosocial work approach, including radical and anti-oppressive approaches (Dominelli, 2012a; 2013) structural social work (Närhi and Matthies, 2016b), ecofeminism (Alston, 2013; Bell, 2013; Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Phillips, 2009) and critique of modernity and the prevailing economic ideology (Coates, 2005; Ife, 2013).

**Indigenous perspectives**

An Indigenous worldview warrants special mention in the discussion of identifying key ecosocial work elements. As first peoples on the country of their respective nations, many traditional Indigenous cultures emphasised a holistic and place-based connectedness with the local natural environment (Zapf, 2009). This worldview understands Earth as sacred and recognises the interdependent relationship between humans and nonhuman species, principles which are expressed through many customs and sustainable strategies that care for Earth (Green & Baldry, 2008). Social work has been reluctant in the past to accept traditional and nonscientific knowledges due to the profession’s origins in Euro-Western and modernist assumptions. However,
Aboriginal authors and activists argue it is necessary for social work to acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing as having equal value and status with Euro-Western knowledges: a notion termed “epistemological equality” (Young, et al., 2013; p. 184). Given the current global environmental crisis, it is time for social work to redress these biases and humbly accept the value Indigenous knowledges can add to the holistic understanding that is essential for ecosocial work (Coates, et al., 2006).

Although many Euro-Western social workers are sympathetic to the marginalisation of Indigenous peoples in society, many are unaware of the subtle colonisation processes taking place within contemporary social work (Bennett, 2015). A process of “turning the lens” away from Indigenous issues towards a focus on the whiteness of Australian social work is needed to expose the invisibility of whiteness and associated privileges that come with being white (Walter et al., 2013, p. 231). The development of practitioner critical self-awareness is essential, involving the process of coming to “terms with the powerful influences that the history of colonisation and the ongoing nature of colonising practices have on the constructions of cultural identities in practice” (Bennet et al., 2011, p. 25). This journey of self-knowledge is usually unsettling for Euro-Western social workers and involves an understanding that the concept of ‘white as normal’ is embedded within the profession and Euro-Western society. As part of accepting an Indigenous worldview, Indigenous social work writers and activists advocate for the decolonisation and indigenisation of social work (Bennet et al., 2011; Dominelli, 2012b; Gray and Coates, 2016; Gray, Coates & Yellow Bird, 2009; Baike, 2015; Hart, 2015; 2010; Walter et al., 2013; Young, et al., 2013) and for the integration of an Indigenous worldview into the developing conceptualisation of ecosocial work (Coates, 2005; Coates et al., 2006; Housten & Gray, 2016; Zapf, 2009).

Global perspectives

Globalisation provides the context for contemporary social work, and the environmental crisis represents a major challenge faced by social workers around the world (Alston & Besthorn, 2012). In particular, a response to the unjust burden of environmental impacts associated with the damaging effects of industrialised societies on many of the world’s poorest citizens is required (Dominelli, 2011). A professional commitment to global citizenship challenges Euro-Western social work to shift from an
individualised to a world-wide perspective, requiring active efforts to ensure behaviours and decisions do not have deleterious effects on less powerful citizens abroad (Hawkins & Knox, 2014; Dominelli, 2010). Authors discussing the global context of ecosocial work have particularly focused on building connections between local and global communities (Dominelli, 2010; Hong & Song, 2010; Jones & Truell, 2012; Lombard, 2015), binary discourses between the Global North and Global South (Dominelli, 2011), global food security (Besthorn, 2013; Deepak, 2014; Phillips, 2009), gender (Alston, 2007, 2015; Deepak, 2014; Phillips, 2009), social work education (des Marias et al., 2014; Teixeira & Krings, 2015) and social work policy (Jones & Truell, 2012; Lombard, 2015).

However, the dominance of Euro-Western knowledge in social work has meant that knowledges from other parts of the world have been marginalised (Dominelli, 2012b). Further, ‘global’ or ‘international’ social work has been criticised for professional imperialism, involving the inappropriate application of dominant Euro-Western knowledges in other parts of the world (Healy, 2008; Hugman, 2010). Rather, social work has much to gain from a wide range of global perspectives, particularly those that provide an alternative to individualist interpretations of welfare in Euro-Western nations, such as collective and community approaches at the macro level of practice (Hugman, 2010). Nevertheless, while many critique international social work for its exploitative tendencies (see for example, Midgley, 1981; Webhi, 2009), other writers contend that increasing global dialogue has contributed to reducing the dominance of Euro-Western knowledges in social work (Hugman & Bowles, 2012; Noble, 2004).

**Environmental sustainability and degrowth**

Ecosocial work authors associate environmental sustainability with protecting the natural environment from degradation or harm, and taking a stance toward finding solutions to address ecological and social problems (Alston & Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2015; Mosher, 2010). However, the term ‘sustainable development’ is also widely used and contested for the obscurity it promotes between distinguishing environmental sustainability from economic sustainability. The most widely accepted definition of ‘sustainable development’ was created by the World Commission on
Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), and refers to “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs” (Ch. 2). This definition of sustainable development has been met with much resistance from activists who claim that national and international groups, such as the United Nations and World Bank, operate within the dominant economic model responsible for climate change, emphasising continued economic growth at the expense of broader issues relating to global poverty, social justice, and depletion of the natural environment (Blewitt, 2015). Nevertheless, Peeters (2012) compared the principles of sustainable development outlined by the WCED, including respect for ecological limits, giving priority to the poor and respect for diversity, with social work values, and argued that these principles are relevant to social work’s mission.

When paired with degrowth, the concept of sustainability addresses the problems referred to above by ensuring that alternative paradigms challenge the prevailing economic growth model. Gray and Coates (2015) argue that social work needs to adopt values relating to sustainability and degrowth, among other related values such as conservation and restoration. These values involve recognition that Earth’s natural resources are finite and that current human activity is depleting Earth’s natural resources at a greater rate than it can currently cope with, causing a variety of environmental problems, including extinction of species, climate variability and global warming (Ife, 2013). Ecosocial work authors highlight a range of alternative paradigms, which challenges the economic growth model, including community-based economies (Elsen, 2017), civil society (Peeters, 2017, 2012) and local welfare systems (Rantamaki & Kattilakoski, 2017).

Ecoliteracy

Ecoliteracy refers to knowledge about the interdependent relationships between living organisms, an understanding about how to sustain and promote healthy ecosystems, and an understanding about how human activity has contributed to the environmental crisis (Jones, 2010). Although the term ‘ecoliteracy’ has not been regularly used in literature, social work authors have indicated a need for increased ecoliteracy in the context of social work education (see for example, Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015;
Teixeira & Krings, 2015; Drolet et al., 2015). In particular, Nesmith and Smyth (2015) identified that social workers need more knowledge about the implications of environmental hazards on health, including the science behind climate change. Miller and Hayward (2014) recommended the development of inter and intra-disciplinary collaborations in education to increase the capacity and knowledge of students, as well as educators, about ecological matters. Jones (2013) also argued that ecoliteracy is essential for redressing human separation from the natural environment as a result of industrial advances, which have alienated humans from understanding the natural world as a holistic entity.

Incorporating content into education to develop ecoliteracy among social work students and future practitioners requires additional space in an already over-crowded curriculum. With many competing topics, it is difficult even for the most dedicated ecosocial work lecturer to integrate new content, such as environmental hazards on health, into subject material. In addition to this, many social work lecturers also require knowledge about health and natural sciences relating to aspects of the environmental crisis. Nevertheless, social work’s multidimensional approach to practice provides opportunities for integrating and developing ecoliteracy across various aspects of curriculum content. For example, Boddy and Ramsay (2017) propose that a partnership approach between social work and permaculture is a useful tool for practitioners in promoting ecological transformative change. Bay (2013; 2016) also refers to transition town initiatives, underpinned by permaculture concepts, as being compatible with social work values, theory and transformative community change. These authors provide insight into how the merging of existing knowledges compatible with ecosocial work might be integrated into social work education. The development of ecoliteracy also provides opportunities for increasing course and program capacity, developing inter-disciplinary collaborations, and equipping social workers for ecosocial work practice.

Transformative ecosocial change

The key elements discussed above formed the basis for conceptualising a transformative ecosocial model (Publication 9) as the culmination of this thesis. By synthesising social work literature in conjunction with research results from this thesis,
a philosophical base consistent with holistic attributes of ecosocial work was constructed as a starting point for further development of ecosocial work within the profession. As previously argued, simply adding the natural environment to existing social work approaches sustains the dominant modernist paradigm rooted in social work, which inadvertently contributes to the misuse of the natural environment (Gray & Coates, 2015; Jones, 2010a, 2013; Philip & Reisch, 2015). While the strategies for social work education and practice explored in this thesis make a valuable contribution to the advancement of ecosocial work, the contradiction posed by an inconsistent philosophical base needed more attention. As a result, the final publication (Publication 9) represented an ecosocial approach that endeavoured to disrupt the dominant modernist paradigm and construct a transformative model for ecosocial work.

This transformative ecosocial approach articulates a consistent philosophical base across the ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice. It is argued that reworking ontological and epistemological assumptions which challenge inherent modernist roots opens up transformative methodologies for practice, including environmentally related work at personal, individual, collective, community and political levels. This transformative ecosocial model provides a starting point for social workers across a wide range of contexts to address incongruity with prevailing modernist assumptions and to re-orient the profession towards transformative ecosocial change. The figure below (taken from Publication 9) represents the proposed ecosocial model for practice.
Figure 1: Transformative ecosocial model (Boetto, 2017, p. 52)

Drawing from the final publication (Publication 9), the ecosocial model characterises the following transformative elements (Boetto, 2016, p. 5):

- adopting a holistic worldview, which perceives every aspect of life as interconnected within a much larger system as reflected in Indigenous perspectives;
- fostering global citizenship within social work, which reflects an appreciation for cultural diversity and contributions made to social work by the Global South;
- adopting fundamental ecological values within the profession relating to sustainability and degrowth;
- reconceptualising an understanding of well-being to foster holistic, environmental and relational attributes; and
- expanding the activities of social workers, including environmentally related work at personal, individual, collective, community and political levels of practice.

By adopting the above principles, which emphasise holism and interdependence, social work can build a consistent philosophical base. This philosophical base is fundamental to transformative change and needs to permeate across all social work domains,
including professional ethics, theory, education and practice. Such a paradigmatic shift offers an alternative conceptualisation to existing modernist and human-centred approaches in social work, and encourages transformative change towards a more sustainable world.

**Implications for conceptualising ecosocial work**

The key concepts and issues outlined above form part of the process for transformative ecosocial change and have implications for the profession. On the one hand, some key concepts, such as criticality and global perspectives, correspond with existing social work knowledge and skills; although there is an acknowledged need to further foster and broaden these concepts in the context of ecosocial work. However, on the other hand, some key concepts, such as holism with the natural world, Indigenous perspectives, sustainability and degrowth, and ecoliteracy, challenge social work to significantly modify and transform the profession’s knowledge base and skills. The latter transformative concepts represent a paradigmatic shift from a human-centred worldview to an ecologically centred worldview (Gray & Coates, 2015). This conceptualisation of ecosocial work suggests a complete overhaul of long-held philosophical assumptions to address inherent modernist perspectives, which view people as separate to the natural world. Such a separation is manifested in behaviours that use the natural environment to fulfil human needs and wants, and which inadvertently contribute to the misuse of the natural environment.

Perhaps the most evident implication drawn from this analysis is the need for social work to embrace new values which foster a holistic view of humans as an interdependent part of the natural world (Ramsay & Boddy, 2016). As mentioned, Gray and Coates (2015) draw from the environmental movement to identify values of sustainability, degrowth, diversity, conservation and restoration as pertinent to social work. These values require social workers to incorporate pro-environmental values into practice; for example, by taking responsibility for protecting the natural environment and for ensuring that no harm is done to the natural environment when facilitating the health and well-being of people. Accepting values inclusive of the natural environment requires an understanding of the innate value of nonhuman organisms (Besthorn, 2012). It also involves an understanding of the interdependent
relationship between humans and the natural world (Besthorn, 2012; Jones, 2013) and acknowledgment that human activity and industrialisation has significantly contributed to the environmental crisis (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2010).

Further to embracing new values, this analysis suggests that social work needs to re-examine existing values fundamental to the profession, rooted, as they are, in modernist assumptions and which view humans as separate to the natural world. Such a separation from the natural world encourages alienation from the natural environment, and this alienation is critiqued for developing a culture of domination and exploitative tendencies towards the misuse of the natural environment (Bell, 2013). According to authors such as Besthorn (2012, 2013b) and Gray and Coates (2015), social justice and human rights values share a similar philosophical base entrenched in utilitarian and anthropocentric worldviews. In other words, social justice and human rights perspectives place humans at the centre of need, rather than acknowledging justice as incorporating the rights of all living organisms. This analysis requires some careful thinking from the profession with regard to the philosophical assumptions underpinning such concepts, including consideration of consistency between ontology (being), epistemology (thinking) and methodology (doing). The reformulation of existing values requires openness towards redefining beliefs in relation to the natural environment, reconceptualising social work’s knowledge base, and linking these dimensions with new ways of ‘doing’ or undertaking practice.

This analysis infers the need for social work to revitalise efforts towards radical and critical practice approaches, which foster social, political and economic change of modern industrial society. A radical approach in social work is not a new method; indeed activism has been particularly influential in social work during times of economic difficulty and/or political change; for example, during the Great Depression in the 1930s and social movements of the 1970s (Payne, 2005). Besthorn and McMillen (2002) contend that the profession must “return to and significantly expand upon its progressive, activist roots” in ecosocial work (p. 228). This involves emancipatory efforts towards protecting the natural environment by challenging the dominant modernist paradigm and associated activities that threaten the natural environment and cause inequalities to humans and nonhumans species.
Closely associated with the above point, social work needs to redress the profession’s codependent relationship with the prevailing economic growth model that encourages misuse of the natural environment. Increasing participation in the welfare state and working towards full employment as part of social work activity unwittingly supports capitalism, which is critiqued for causing climate change through the unsustainable use of Earth’s natural resources (Coates, 2003; Ferreira, 2010; Ife, 2013). The search for alternative paradigms, which facilitate the profession’s movement away from the dominant economic discourse, forms part of this transition. As mentioned, Indigenous perspectives provide an alternative worldview based on principles of holism and interdependence (Coates et al., 2006), as well as models of sustainable well-being (Helne & Hirvilammi, 2017), community-based economies (Elsen, 2017), support of civil societies (Peeters, 2017, 2012), and local welfare systems (Rantamaki & Kattilakoski, 2017).

Finally, the IFSW, as a representative body for 116 social work member nations, has a responsibility to provide leadership and support to nations with regard to developing an ecologically centred profession. While the IFSW (2016) aims to develop social outcomes by influencing international organisations, the IFSW also contributes to the development of the profession at the national level (IFSW, 2016). Recent moves within the IFSW has acknowledged environmental sustainability; however, these changes in no way indicate a movement towards an ecologically centred profession. Contrary to these moves, the removal of reference to the ‘environment’ in the definition of social work in 2014 (IFSW & IASSW, 2014) diminishes the place of environmental sustainability and the natural environment as central to the profession. According to Jones & Truell (2012), the review of the definition of social work was aimed to promote consistency with the Global Agenda which prioritises environmental sustainability (IFSW, IASSW & ICSW, 2012), yet contrary to this, the term ‘environment’ was eliminated from the original definition. Given that the definition of social work is stated throughout national policies to provide a rationale and framework, this essentially removes an important stimulus for national associations to include reference to environmental sustainability and the natural environment in ethical and policy documents.
Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to explore how an ecologically centred approach could be developed in social work. In particular, the research focused on exploring strategies for social work education and professional practice, as well as the identification of key concepts and issues to further the conceptualisation of ecosocial work. The significance of this research lies in the exploration of multiple approaches and the building of knowledge through the examination and synthesis of key findings from each approach explored. This exploration of multiple approaches enabled the conceptualisation of a transformative ecosocial model for social work (Publication 9), which formed the culmination of this thesis. This research argues for professional change with regard to the prioritisation of an ecologically centred approach in social work education and practice, and for the integration of key characteristics associated with ecosocial work.

One of the main themes to emerge from this research is the need for transformative ecosocial change within the profession. This theme permeates across all three research objectives involving social work education, professional practice and the conceptualisation of ecosocial work. Transformative ecosocial change refers to a fundamental re-orientation of human-centred perceptions of the world toward views that reflect a holistic and interdependent view of humans as part of the natural world (Gray & Coates, 2015; Besthorn, 2012; Jones, 2013). This re-orientation requires the profession to acknowledge the influence of the modernist discourse on the profession, both from the past and within contemporary society (Ferreira, 2010; Webb, 2007).

Various social work authors, such as Coates (2005) and Ife (2013) contend that the profession has contributed to the exploitation of the natural environment by helping people to adapt and participate in a society where the dominant economic model is centred on values of individualism, competition and economic growth. Consequently, the co-dependency between social work and modernist assumptions represents a major dilemma for an ecologically centred profession whose aims are at odds with industrialist capitalist objectives.

The process of perspective transformation provides a means for how the profession can transition from a modernist to holistic perspective of the natural world
(Gray & Coates, 2015; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). Perspective transformation involves the challenging of fixed assumptions or frames of reference, which have been acquired uncritically through processes of socialisation since the inception of the profession (Jones, 2010, 2013). Additionally, a guided process of critical reflexivity for students is essential for deconstructing long-held assumptions acquired through socialisation processes in contemporary Euro-Western society, which are pervaded by values of individualism, consumerism and economic growth. These values contradict the fundamental basis of an ecologically centred profession and might impede learning about complex issues associated with the environmental crisis (Jones, 2013; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). Fundamental to transformative ecosocial change is the articulation of a distinct philosophical base across ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of practice. This model emphasises holism and interdependence, and facilitates the development of alternative practice approaches that challenge the dominant modernist discourse. This transformative approach is integral to enhancing an ecosocial approach in social work education and practice and to the overall conceptualisation of ecosocial work.

These findings are broadly in line with ec-social work writers who advocate for a paradigmatic shift within the profession, particularly in relation to recognition that the social work profession was born out of industrialist and capitalist roots (Coates, 2005; Ferreira, 2010; Ife, 2013), and the need for social work to transition from a modernist to holistic worldview (Gray & Coates, 2015; Besthorn, 2012; Jones, 2013; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). However, my findings are at odds with social work writers who perceive conventional practice as requiring little change. In other words, proponents of this approach accept that adding environmental content to existing social work approaches expands social work knowledge and is, therefore, inclusive of natural environmental issues. While the research findings do not discount the value of multiple approaches both within and outside conventional professional frameworks, it is argued that broadening existing frameworks alone will not address the paradox of inherent modernist roots that separate the profession from the natural world, and which are manifested in behaviours that use the natural environment to fulfil humans’ needs and wants. This alienation from the natural environment impedes the profession’s capacity to challenge modernist assumptions associated with individualism, consumerism and
the pursuit of prosperity, thus contributing indirectly to the global environmental crisis.

The findings of this research were restricted by the lack of a range of stakeholders engaged in the research. Although this research engaged with some stakeholders involved in professional social work, such as social work students, practitioners and older people, the research might have benefited from further engagement with less powerful individuals and groups in order to uncover the experience of people with ‘unheard’ or silenced voices, such as people with refugee backgrounds, culturally and linguistically diverse groups and young people. In particular, only one person who identified as being Aboriginal participated in the research (see Publication 7). Although other participants may have been qualified to identify as Aboriginal, the research did not specifically engage with Indigenous groups. The incorporation of Indigenous worldviews is critical for the development of ecosocial work, particularly in relation to: the decolonisation and indigenisation of social work (Dominelli, 2012b; Gray and Coates, 2016; Gray et al. 2009; Baike, 2015; Hart, 2015; 2010); recognition of the knowledges that contribute to a holistic and interdependent conceptualisation of the natural world (Coates, 2005; Coates et al., 2006; Housten & Gray, 2016; Zapf, 2009); and sustainable strategies that might be applicable to social work and the wider society.

Without further research into ecologically centred approaches, ecosocial work is at risk of retaining its current marginalised status within the profession. Continuing the momentum for change requires further research with regard to practice strategies that are applicable across a wide range of practice settings. For example, the transformative ecosocial model (Publication 9), may have potential, but requires further research into the usefulness and effectiveness of applying this framework in practice. Molyneux (2010) argues that unless research is undertaken to further develop ecosocial work practice detail then ecosocial work will remain a peripheral rather than mainstream approach in the profession. Crawford et al. (2015) contend that ecosocial work is more “conceptual”, rather than “actual” (p. 595), and McKinnon (2013) highlights the barriers that impede or constrain practitioners with pro-environmental values from incorporating sustainability into practice. Future research could take the form of action research and/or cooperative inquiry, which involves
collaboration with stakeholders, including practitioners, Indigenous groups and people likely to access social work services, to generate knowledge about ecosocial work practice approaches.

This thesis enhances the development of an ecologically centred approach within social work. Through the exploration of a range of education and practice strategies, the contradiction between social work’s inherent modernist roots and an emerging holistic conceptualisation of ecosocial work was exposed. Consequently, key findings suggest that transformative change within the profession to disrupt the dominant modernist paradigm and reconstruct underlying philosophical assumptions consistent with ecosocial work is urgently needed. Although it is acknowledged a paradigm shift such as this requires the collective efforts of social work scholars and practitioners, the key findings from this thesis, particularly the development of the transformative ecosocial work model (Publication 9), represent a starting point for contributing to transformative change and the development of ecosocial work within the profession. A distinct philosophical base integrating sustainability, holism and interdependence, offers social work an alternative foundation to existing modernist and human-centred approaches in social work. Given the context of an accelerating global environmental crisis (IPCC, 2014), and the call from social work scholars to integrate environmental sustainability within social work (Alston, 2013; Gray & Coates, 2015; Matthies & Närhi, 2017), it is timely for social work to take action towards transformative change that will result in a more ecologically centred profession.
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Appendix 1: Statements from co-authors

Appendix 1.1: Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program

PhD by Portfolio

Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto

Collaborators: Bernadette Moorhead, Dr Karen Bell

As a collaborator of this publication entitled “Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program”, I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the collaboration team</td>
<td>The candidate and collaborators were facilitators of an associated Study Abroad Program and shared a common interest in international social work. The research project was therefore established as a collaborative project. Each collaborator selected a specific project area to take the lead on, and the candidate chose the environment (the focus of this publication).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>Responsibility for the design of the project was equally shared between the collaborators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval</td>
<td>Ethics approval forms were jointly completed and submitted to ethics committee.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Responsibility for literature review was undertaken by the candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology and data collection</td>
<td>Evaluation pre-test and post-test surveys were jointly developed by the candidate and collaborators. The candidate took responsibility for developing and facilitating the workshop/focus group.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis and interpretation</td>
<td>Responsibility for data analysis and interpretation of results was the candidates, and included:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Thematic analysis of data for surveys and workshops</td>
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330
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<tr>
<th><strong>Design of paper</strong></th>
<th>Design and outline of the paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from collaborators.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| **Writing of content** | Writing of the publication was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from collaborators. The following sections were written by the candidate:  
  - Abstract  
  - Introduction  
  - Program description  
  - Methodology  
  - Results  
  - Discussion  
  - Conclusion  
  - References |
| **Editing** | Editing of paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from collaborators. |
| **Submission of activity and responding to feedback** | Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate, with ongoing feedback from collaborators in relation to revisions. |

Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature:  

Date: 29\textsuperscript{th} July 2014

---

**The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.**

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto’s contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto, Bernadette Moorhead & Karen Bell.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bernadette Moorhead</td>
<td></td>
<td>15/6/15</td>
<td>Colleague and publication collaborator</td>
<td><a href="mailto:bmoorhead@csu.edu.au">bmoorhead@csu.edu.au</a></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dr Karen Bell</td>
<td></td>
<td>01/07/15</td>
<td>Colleague and publication collaborator</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kbell@csu.edu.au">kbell@csu.edu.au</a></td>
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Appendix 1.2: Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship

PhD by Portfolio

Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto

Collaborator: Dr Karen Bell

As a collaborator of this publication entitled “Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship”, I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

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<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td>Establishment of the collaboration team</td>
<td>The team was originally established by Bill Anscombe as part of a larger sustainability project. Responsibility for the development of the ‘environmental sustainability on-line program’and writing of the paper formed one part of the larger sustainability project and was undertaken by the candidate and collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval</td>
<td>Responsibility for completion of ethics approval documents was undertaken by the candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Design of the online education initiative</td>
<td>The design of the on-line education initiative was led by the candidate and collaborator. Other people involved included Bill Anscombe and Heather Barton. The candidate designed two out of six workshop topics, and together the candidate and collaborator edited all six workshop topics.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data collection, analysis, interpretation | Responsibility for data collection, analysis and interpretation was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborator:  
  - Thematic analysis of data for three out of six workshops each  
  - Relating results to existing literature |
<table>
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<tr>
<th><strong>Design of paper</strong></th>
<th>The candidate initially designed the outline of the paper, which was improved by both the candidate and collaborator as the paper progressed.</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Writing of content</strong></td>
<td>Responsibility for writing the paper was jointly shared between the candidate and the collaborator, as per the following:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Abstract jointly written</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>- The introduction and literature review was the candidate’s responsibility with feedback and editing from the collaborator</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- The description section was jointly written</td>
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<td>- The methods section was the collaborator’s responsibility with feedback and editing from the candidate</td>
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<td>- The findings section was equally shared as candidate and collaborator recorded three workshop results each</td>
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<td>- The discussion and implications section was equally shared by the candidate and the collaborator</td>
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<td>- The references were the responsibility of the candidate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Editing</strong></td>
<td>Editing of the paper was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Submission of activity and responding to feedback</strong></td>
<td>Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate. Revisions were jointly prepared and developed by the candidate and the collaborator.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature: 

Date: 29th July 2014

The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.
I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto’s contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto & Karen Bell.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
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<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g. PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr Karen Bell</td>
<td></td>
<td>01/07/15</td>
<td>Colleague/collaborator</td>
<td><a href="mailto:kbell@csu.edu.au">kbell@csu.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>02 69332179</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 1.3: Exploring food security in social work field education: Analysis of a food relief program

**PhD by Portfolio**

**Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works**

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto

**Collaborators:** Jessica Inch, Samuel Lloyd, Neil Barber

As a collaborator of this publication entitled "Exploring Food Security in Social Work Field Education: Analysis of a Food Relief Program", I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>The design of the project was developed by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborators.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Responsibility for the literature review was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data collection, analysis, interpretation                          | Responsibility for data collection was undertaken by collaborators, Jessica Inch and Samuel Lloyd. Analysis and interpretation was led by candidate in conjunction with collaborators, including:  
  - Thematic analysis  
  - Critical reflection of data  
  - Relating results to existing literature  
  - Identifying implications for the profession and future research |
| Design of paper                                                     | The design and outline of the paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborators. |
| Writing of content                                                 | The writing of the publication was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborators. The candidate wrote the following sections:  
  - Abstract  
  - Introduction  
  - Program description (in part)  
  - Reflection process  
  - Discussion  
  - Implications for social work  
  - Conclusion  
  - References |
| Editing                                                             | Editing of the paper was primarily undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborators. |
| Submission of activity and responding to feedback                  | Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate, |

*Form designed by (in alphabetical order): Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Rohena Duncombe and Monica Short.*
with ongoing feedback from the collaborators in relation to revisions.

Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature: __________________________

Date: 15th October 2013

---

The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto’s contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto, Jessica Inch, Samuel Lloyd, Neil Barber.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jessica Inch</td>
<td></td>
<td>07/07/2015</td>
<td>Social work student</td>
<td>0431612995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td><a href="mailto:jessica.2006.06@sympato.com">jessica.2006.06@sympato.com</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samuel Lloyd</td>
<td></td>
<td>07/07/15</td>
<td>Social work student</td>
<td>0410859040</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>samuel.lloyd09.com</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil Barber</td>
<td></td>
<td>07/07/15</td>
<td>Colleague employed by UnitingCare as a community development coordinator</td>
<td>0410735204</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Form designed by (in alphabetical order):
Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Rohena Duncombe and Monica Short.
Appendix 1.4: Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics

PhD by Portfolio
Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto

Collaborators: Professor Wendy Bowles, Peter Jones, Professor Jennifer McKinnon

As a collaborator of this publication entitled "Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics", I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>The project was designed by Jennifer McKinnon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Establishment of the collaboration team</td>
<td>The team was initiated by Jennifer McKinnon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>The candidate undertook primary responsibility for undertaking the literature review with ongoing feedback from collaborators.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data collection, analysis, interpretation                     | Responsibility for data collection, analysis and interpretation was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborators. Specifically, the candidate undertook the following:  
- Reviewing three codes of ethics  
- Constructing table of data  
- Relating results to existing literature  
- Identifying implications for profession |
| Design of paper                                               | The candidate and collaborators shared responsibility for the design of the paper. |
| Writing and/or critical appraisal of content                  | The candidate was responsible for writing the following parts of the paper:  
- Introduction section (part of)  
- Parts of comparative analysis section  
- Part of Implications and Suggestions section  
- References section |
| Editing                                                        | The candidate and collaborators shared responsibility for the design of the paper. |
| Submission of activity and responding to feedback             | Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of Wendy Bowles with ongoing feedback from the candidate and other collaborators. Revisions were jointly prepared and developed by the collaborators and candidate. |

Form designed by (in alphabetical order):  
Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Rhema Duncombe and Monica Short.
Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 30th July 2014

The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto’s contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Wendy Bowles, Heather Boetto, Peter Jones and Jennifer McKinnon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Wendy Bowles</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.7.2015</td>
<td>PhD Supervisor</td>
<td><a href="mailto:wbowles@csu.edu.au">wbowles@csu.edu.au</a> (02) 69332610</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter Jones</td>
<td></td>
<td>16.7.2015</td>
<td>Research Partner</td>
<td><a href="mailto:Peter.jones1@icu.edu.au">Peter.jones1@icu.edu.au</a> (07) 4781 5075</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professor Jennifer McKinnon</td>
<td></td>
<td>20.7.2015</td>
<td>PhD Supervisor</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jmckinnon@csu.edu.au">jmckinnon@csu.edu.au</a> (02) 69332680</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Form designed by (in alphabetical order):
Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Rohane Duncombe and Monica Short.
Appendix 1.5: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective

PhD by Portfolio
Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto
Collaborator: Professor Jennifer McKinnon

As a collaborator of this publication entitled "Rural women and climate change: A gender-inclusive social policy perspective", I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>The design of the project was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval</td>
<td>Responsibility for completion of ethics approval documents was undertaken by the candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Responsibility for the literature review was undertaken by the candidate with editing and feedback provided by the collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Methodology and data collection</td>
<td>The candidate and collaborator jointly constructed the semi-structured interview format. The candidate took responsibility for undertaking semi-structured interviews for four out of seven participants.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data analysis, interpretation                                 | Responsibility for data analysis and interpretation of results was the candidates, and included:  
  - Thematic analysis of transcripts  
  - Relating results to existing literature  
  - Identifying implications for the profession and future research. |
| Design of paper                                               | The design and outline of the paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator. |
| Writing of content                                            | The writing of the publication was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator, and included:  
  - Abstract  
  - Introduction  
  - Research process  
  - Findings  
  - Discussion  
  - Conclusion  
  - References |
| Editing                                                       | Editing and feedback about the paper was primarily undertaken by the collaborator. |
| Submission of activity and responding to feedback             | Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate, with ongoing feedback from the collaborator. |

Form designed by (in alphabetical order): Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Kohera Duncombe and Monica Short.
Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature:  

Date: 15th October 2013

---

The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto's contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto & Jennifer McKinnon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Jennifer McKinnon</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
15/10/2013 |            | PhD Supervisor | jmckinnon@csu.edu.au (02) 69332680 |
Appendix 1.6: Gender and climate change in Australia: A review of differences

PhD by Portfolio
Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works

PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto

Collaborator: Professor Jennifer McKinnon

As a collaborator of this publication entitled “Gender and climate change in rural Australia: A review of differences”, I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>The design of the project was jointly shared by the candidate and the collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Responsibility for the literature review was undertaken by the candidate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Data collection, analysis, interpretation                         | Responsibility for systematic literature review undertaken by the candidate, including:  
  - Thematic analysis of literature  
  - Relating results to existing literature  
  - Identifying implications for the profession and future research |
| Design of paper                                                    | The design and outline of the paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator. |
| Writing of content                                                 | The writing of the publication was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator. The candidate wrote the following sections:  
  - Abstract  
  - Introduction  
  - Research process  
  - Findings  
  - Discussion  
  - Conclusion  
  - References |
| Editing                                                             | Editing and feedback about the paper was primarily undertaken by the collaborator. |
| Submission of activity and responding to feedback                 | Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate, with ongoing feedback from the collaborator in relation to revisions. |

Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 15th October 2013
The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto’s contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto & Jennifer McKinnon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Jennifer McKinnon</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>15/10/2015</td>
<td>PhD Supervisor</td>
<td><a href="mailto:jmckinnon@csu.edu.au">jmckinnon@csu.edu.au</a>  (02) 69332680</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 1.7: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

PhD by Portfolio  
Authorship Contribution in Collaborative Works  
PhD candidate name: Heather Boetto  
Collaborator: Professor Wendy Bowles  

As a collaborator of this publication entitled "Ecosocial transformations: Exploring the wisdom of our elders", I confirm that I have made the following contributions:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity undertaken by PhD Candidate (add or delete as appropriate)</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Design of project</td>
<td>The design of the project was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborator.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics approval</td>
<td>Responsibility for completion of ethics approval documents was undertaken by the candidate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Literature Review</td>
<td>Responsibility for the literature review was undertaken by the candidate with editing and feedback provided by the collaborator.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Methodology and data collection                               | The candidate and collaborator jointly constructed the semi-structured interview format.  
The candidate took responsibility for undertaking semi-structured interviews for six out of ten participants. |
| Data analysis, interpretation                                 | Responsibility for data analysis and interpretation of results was jointly shared by the candidate and collaborator, and included:  
- Thematic analysis of transcripts  
- Relating results to existing literature  
- Identifying implications for the profession and future research. |
| Design of paper                                               | The design and outline of the paper was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator. |
| Writing of content                                            | The writing of the publication was undertaken by the candidate with ongoing feedback from the collaborator, and included: |

*Form designed by (in alphabetical order):*  
Heather Barton, Heather Boetto, Rohena Duncombe and Monica Short.*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Editing</th>
<th>Editing and feedback about the paper was primarily undertaken by the collaborator.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Submission of activity and responding to feedback</td>
<td>Submission of publication and responding to feedback was the responsibility of the candidate, with ongoing feedback from the collaborator in relation to revisions.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name of candidate: Heather Boetto

Signature: [Signature]

Date: 16th June 2016

The below is to be completed by the collaborators. Many thanks.

I agree with the above description of Heather Boetto's contribution to the publication and I agree for its inclusion in her doctoral research and for it to be submitted for examination. I agree to the authorship being listed in the following order: Heather Boetto & Wendy Bowles.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of collaborator(s)</th>
<th>Signature</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Relationship to candidate, e.g., PhD supervisor</th>
<th>Email and phone number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor Wendy Bowles</td>
<td>[Signature]</td>
<td>10-06-2016</td>
<td>PhD Supervisor</td>
<td>(02) 69332610</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 2: Research information sheets

Appendix 2.1: Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program

INFORMATION SHEET

Project title: Student understanding of key themes in social work: Impacts of short term international study experiences

Dr Karen Bell (Chief Investigator) Ms Heather Boetto (Co-investigator) Ms Bernadette Moorhead (Co-investigator)
(BH) 693 32179 (BH): 693 32949 (BH): 6933 4513
(E) kbell@csu.edu.au (E): HBoetto@csu.edu.au (E): bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

Dear

The overall aim of this research is to learn more about the impact of the India short-term study program you will be participating in during mid November. Further, we are interested in your understanding of key social work themes as a result of participating in the international study program. These themes relate to gender, environment and professional identity. This information will be used to contribute relevant knowledge in these areas, with particular reference to the value of short-term international study programs.

Participation in this research project is voluntary and will involve the completion of two written evaluation surveys (pre-program and post-program), as well as three reflective workshops during the India study program.

The pre-program survey will be distributed seven days prior to departure; the post-program survey will be distributed upon return. Each survey will take approximately 15-30 minutes to complete. The reflective workshops will occur during the program; one in week one, two in week two. Each workshop should take a maximum of an hour. Key themes raised during the reflective workshops will be noted by the co-facilitator. No identifying details will be noted.

The main research questions for this project are as follows and as such data collection will focus on these areas:

• What has been the impact of the India study program for Charles Sturt University students?
• Has student understanding of key social work themes around gender, environment and professional identity been impacted as a result of their international study experience in India?
• If so, how has their understanding been impacted?
• How does their understanding impact on how they see social work?
• How does their understanding impact on how they see the social work role?

Please note that your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any time prior to the completion of the project or associated publications. Withdrawal of the information you provide will not be possible after that time. Non-participation or withdrawal will not result in any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

You can refuse to answer any question during data collection. If at any time you become uncomfortable, the process will be stopped immediately. If you require further aid the investigators will assist you to access relevant support through CSU Student Services via online, telephone or direct counselling. This can be achieved through the following details:

• CSU Student support: http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/my-support/counsell/home
• CSU Student Central: +61 1800 275 278

To maintain confidentiality, any potentially identifying details provided will be changed and all data will be stored in locked files and password protected. The information gathered will be collated and analysed for the purposes of publication in professional/academic journals and conference papers. This will allow relevant knowledge to be shared with key stakeholders and provide opportunities to generate further research and action where appropriate.

If you wish to participate in this research project, please complete the consent form and return it in the reply-paid envelope provided. You are welcome to contact the chief investigator to ask questions or discuss the project further if you wish.

Please note that the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Chair: Chair, Research Ethics Committee
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Locked Bag 678
WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678
Ph: (02) 6933 2249
Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Thank you for considering participating in this research. If you have any questions at all please do not hesitate to contact the chief investigator.

Kind regards,
Dr Karen Bell
Ms Heather Boetto MSW
Ms Bernadette Moorhead BSW (Hons)
Appendix 2.2: Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship

INFORMATION SHEET: ON-LINE INTERACT WORKSHOP

Project title: Driving holistic change: The consilience of environmental, academic/educational, international and community sustainability goals

Dr Bill Anscombe  
(Co-investigator)  
(BH): 693 32179  
(E): banscombe@csu.edu.au

Dr Karen Bell  
(Chief-investigator)  
(BH): 693 32179  
(E): kbell@csu.edu.au

Ms Heather Barton  
(Co-investigator)  
(BH): 69332783  
(E): hebarton@csu.edu.au

Ms Heather Boetto  
(Co-investigator)  
(BH): 69332949  
(E): hboetto@csu.edu.au

Dear

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a short-term on-line workshop on student knowledge about social work and the environment. A voluntary six week educational program will be offered to students undertaking social work studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU), and will be available on CSU’s online Interact system throughout session 2, 2012.

Student’s participating in the program will be introduced to topics relating to the environment with the aim of promoting an increased understanding of the significant role social workers have to play in issues relating to the environment. The program will focus on promoting environmentally responsible citizenship with concern for social justice and sustainability at local and global levels.

The main research questions are:

- Has student understanding of the environment been impacted as a result of the on-line Interact workshop?
- Has student understanding about the role social workers have to play in issues relating to the environment been impacted?

Participation in the on-line Interact workshop will involve the completion of two short evaluation surveys undertaken on-line (pre-program and post-program). Each week (for six weeks) information relating to a new environmental topic area will be introduced, and participation in forum discussions will take place to provide students an opportunity to share their thoughts.

Each week exploration of the environmental topic area will not require more than 15 minutes, unless students choose to spend more time. The workshop has been
designed this way in recognition that students have existing workloads and to ensure students are not over burdened by the workshop.

Please note that your participation in this research is entirely voluntary and you are able to withdraw at any time without penalty prior to the completion of the project or associated publications. Withdrawal of the information you provide will not be possible after that time.

You can refuse to answer any question during data collection. If at any time you become uncomfortable, you can stop the process immediately. If you require further aid the research assistant or investigators will assist you to access relevant support through CSU Student Services via online, telephone or direct counselling. This can be achieved through the following details:

- CSU Student support: http://www.csu.edu.au/division/studserv/my-support/counsell/home
- CSU Student Central: +61 1800 275 278

To maintain confidentiality, a (non-academic) research assistant has been employed to administer and manage the on-line workshop. This means that researchers who also hold lecturing positions will not have access to the workshop to ensure your details of your participation remain confidential. Any potentially identifying details provided will be changed and all data will be stored in locked files and password protected. The information gathered will be collated and analysed for the purposes of publication in professional/academic journals and conference papers. This will allow relevant knowledge to be shared with key stakeholders and provide opportunities to generate further research and action where appropriate.

If you wish to participate in this research project, please complete the consent form and return it to the research assistant electronically, or in the reply-paid envelope provided. You are welcome to contact the chief investigator to ask questions or discuss the project further if you wish.

Please note that the School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this project. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Chair:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Locked Bag 678
WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678
Ph: (02) 6933 2249
Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Thank you for considering participating in this research. If you have any questions at all please do not hesitate to contact the chief investigator.

Kind regards,

Dr Bill Anscombe
Dr Karen Bell
Ms Heather Barton MSW
Ms Heather Boetto MSW
Appendix 2.3: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective

RESEARCH INFORMATION

RESEARCH PROJECT: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective
PRINCIPAL RESEARCHER: Jennifer McKinnon ph. (02) 6933 2249
CO-RESEARCHER: Heather Boetto ph. (02) 6933 2949

The purpose of this project is to explore the capacity of rural women to influence climate change, without adding to the burdens they already experience. Women are disadvantaged on almost all social and economic indicators (e.g. income, employment status, and health) compared to men, and are primarily responsible for household and family tasks due to gender roles and the gendered nature of rural Australia. This places women at risk of being blamed for household contributions to climate change, and has the potential to further subordinate their already disadvantaged position. The dominance of men in the environmental policy making arena presents the risk that policies will not engage women or reflect women’s lived experience, and possibly further burden their everyday lives. This project aims to explore rural women’s current engagement with climate change issues and the kinds of services, resources, and policies that might be helpful to women in addressing the impacts of climate change.

This project aims to interview up to ten women activists/service providers. Interviews will take approximately one hour to complete. As a voluntary participant, you are able to withdraw from participating in the interview at any time without being subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment. Interviews will be taped, transcribed and analysed by computer, using N-vivo data management program.

Confidentiality will be maintained by ensuring that no one is identified on tape, and names will be changed where any reference is made to participants in the final report. Tapes will remain the property of the researchers and no one will have access to the tapes, apart from a research assistant during the data analysis period. The research assistant will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement.

Information collected during the interviews will be collated and used to inform the environmental and social services sector about rural women and climate change. Results will be presented at a relevant conference and published in an appropriate journal.

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Dr Emma Rush
Chair, Research Ethics Committee
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix 2.4: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

RESEARCH PROJECT: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

RESEARCHERS: Wendy Bowles BSW PhD and Heather Boetto BA/BSW M Soc Wk

School of Humanities & Social Sciences
Charles Sturt University
Contact:
Wendy Bowles:
Phone: (02) 6933 2249 or email: wbowles@csu.edu.au
Heather Boetto:
Phone: (02) 6933 2949 or email: hboetto@csu.edu.au

Wendy Bowles and Heather Boetto are social work academics at Charles Sturt University. We are researching how older Australians develop sustainable living practices in later life with the aim of learning lessons from their experiences that can be applied to promote sustainable living in the wider community.

You are warmly invited to participate in this research project. The following information is provided to help you to make an informed decision about whether you will participate. Please take the time to read it carefully and discuss it with others if you wish.

What is the purpose of the research?
The purpose of this research project is to explore how older Australians are ‘downsizing’ from consumerist lifestyles in order to live more simply and sustainably. This includes people who are exploring new models of self-sufficiency and those seeking lifestyles that are less damaging to the natural environment. This could include lifestyle choices to reduce consumerism and/or address environmental decline, environmental volunteerism and political activism on environmental issues. We want to find out what strategies you use, and your experiences of what helps and what hinders your efforts to live more sustainably and/or protect the natural environment.

We wish to learn from the experiences of older adults with the time and interest in addressing environmental decline, to apply lessons in sustainable living for the wider community. Thus the title: ‘Exploring the wisdom of our Elders’.

Why have I been invited to participate?
We are seeking Australians who have retired or are aged 50 years and older who are interested in finding ways to live in more sustainable and ‘environmentally friendly’ ways – people who seek to adopt strategies to slow environmental decline.

What does the study involve?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to undertake an initial interview that will take approximately one hour. We will offer you the option to receive the results of the research project.
Are there risks and benefits to me for taking part in this study?
The information being gathered is focused on sustainable living strategies so there are very few direct personal risks associated with the research. However, if you disclose personally painful information during discussions it is possible you may experience some discomfort.

If you experience discomfort following the interview please contact Lifeline on ph: 13 11 14.

The benefits associated with the research are that participants have the opportunity to contribute to developing new knowledge about sustainable and environmentally friendly lifestyles.

Will taking part in this study cost me anything, and will I be paid?
There are no financial expenses for this research study. If you are located at a distance from Wagga Wagga, NSW, then the appropriate teleconference or video conference facilities will be used for interviews. The only cost to you will be your time, approximately 1 hour. You will not be paid for your participation in the project.

How long will my involvement in the research take?
Your involvement in the research project will consist of an interview of approximately 1 hour. You will be offered the opportunity to review and check all the information you give us. You will also be offered the chance to receive the results of this research project once it is completed.

What if I don’t want to take part in this study?
Participation in this research is entirely your choice. Only those people who give their informed consent will be included in the project. Whether or not you decide to participate is your decision and will not disadvantage you. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the project at any time without giving reason. However, once the data is de-identified and in the process of analysis it will not be possible to withdraw your data.

How will my confidentiality be protected?
Any information collected will be stored securely and only accessed by the researchers unless you consent otherwise. Information will be retained for at least five years by the researchers at Charles Sturt University. All information gathered will have names replaced with codes and categories as part of the data analysis process.

Information collected during the research will be collated and used for furthering the development of ecologically sustainable lifestyles. Results will be presented at relevant conferences and published in appropriate journals to contribute to this area of research. Confidentiality will be maintained by ensuring that no one is identified in the publication of results unless they have given their written consent to do so.

Who owns the research?
The researchers will maintain ownership rights of the research and will acknowledge your contribution to the research unless you request otherwise. If you would like to be
acknowledged for your contribution to the research, your name will be provided at the beginning or end of the presentation or publication, and not as part of the results section.

What should I do if I want to discuss this study further before I decide? If you would like further information please contact the researchers, Wendy Bowles on (02) 69 332249 and Heather Boetto, on phone (02) 69332949.

Who should I contact if I have concerns about the conduct of this study? If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:

The Executive Officer
Arts Faculty Human Ethics Committee
Charles Sturt University
Boorooma Street
Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678
Tel: 02 6933 4388
Email: artsfhec@csu.edu.au

Thank you for considering this invitation.
This information sheet is for you to keep.
Appendix 3: Research consent forms

Appendix 3.1: Broadening the ‘environment’ in social work: Impacts of a study abroad program

CONSENT FORM

Project title: Student understanding of key themes in social work: impacts of short term international study experiences

Dr Karen Bell (Chief Investigator)   Ms Heather Boetto (Co-investigator)   Ms Bernadette Moorhead (Co-investigator)
(BH) 693 32179   (BH): 693 32949   (BH): 6933 4513
(E) kbell@csu.edu.au   (E): HBoetto@csu.edu.au   (E): bmoorhead@csu.edu.au

The purpose of this research is to explore the relevance of the India short-term study program. In particular, student understanding of key social work themes around gender, environment and professional identity will be focused upon. Two data collection methods will be employed. The first will involve pre and post program evaluation surveys. The second method involves three reflective workshops that will occur during the India study program. The completed survey forms and other data will be kept in a locked filing cabinet, until such time as no longer needed (approximately 20 years). At this time all information will be shredded and destroyed. It is envisaged that this research will add to the knowledge base about the impact of short-term international study programs. If you wish to participate please read the participant statement and sign below.

Participant statement:

I am willing to participate in this research project. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and as such I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me, including the potential discomfort associated with the research. Also, I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers. I understand that any
information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me is confidential and that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be used or published without my written permission. I also give permission for themes from the reflective workshops to be recorded in the form of hand written notes.

The CSU School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Locked Bag 678
WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678
Ph: (02) 6933 2249        Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Please print name:  
Signed:  
Date:
Appendix 3.2: Environmental sustainability in social work education: An online initiative to encourage global citizenship

CONSENT FORM: ON-LINE INTERACT WORKSHOP

Project title: Driving holistic change: The consilience of environmental, academic/educational, international and community sustainability goals

Dr Bill Anscombe
(Chief-investigator)
(BH) 69332631
(E) banscombe@csu.edu.au

Dr Karen Bell
(Co-investigator)
(BH): 693 32179
(E): kbell@csu.edu.au

Ms Heather Barton
(Co-investigator)
(BH). 69332783
(E): hebarton@csu.edu.au

Ms Heather Boetto
(Co-investigator)
(BH). 69332949
(E): hboetto@csu.edu.au

The purpose of this research is to explore the impact of a short-term on-line workshop on student knowledge about social work and the environment. A voluntary six week educational program will be offered to students undertaking social work studies at Charles Sturt University (CSU), and will be available on CSU’s online Interact system. Student’s participating in the program will be introduced to topics relating to the environment with the aim of promoting an increased understanding of the significant role social workers have to play in issues relating to the environment. The program will focus on promoting environmentally responsible citizenship with concern for social justice and sustainability at the local and global levels.

Participant statement:

I am willing to participate in this research project. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary and as such I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time, and if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me, including the potential discomfort associated with the research. Also, I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers. I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me is
confidential and that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be used or published without my written permission.

The CSU School of Humanities and Social Sciences Ethics Research Sub-Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Chair, Research Ethics Committee  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Locked Bag 678  
WAGGA WAGGA NSW 2678  
Ph: (02) 6933 2249  
Email: humgen@csu.edu.au

Please print name:  
Signed:  
Date:

Appendix 3.3: Rural women and climate change: A gender inclusive social policy perspective

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROJECT:  Rural women and climate change: A gender-inclusive social policy perspective

Principal researcher: Jennifer McKinnon  
ph. (02) 69332249  
Co-researcher: Heather Boetto  
ph. (02) 6933 2949

I am willing to participate in this research project. I understand that my interview will be audio taped and that I am able to withdraw from the interview at any time, and that if I do I will not be subjected to any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understand the information provided above. I have been given the opportunity to ask questions about the research and received satisfactory answers.

I understand that any information or personal details gathered in the course of this research about me are confidential and that neither my name nor any other identifying information will be used or published without my written permission.

The School of Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:
Dr Emma Rush  
Chair, Research Ethics Committee  
School of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Charles Sturt University  
Locked Bag 678  
Wagga Wagga NSW 2678  
Phone: (02) 6933 2777 Fax: (02) 69332792  
Email: erush@csu.edu.au

Print Name  

Signed  

Date  

______________________________  
______________________________  
______________________________
Appendix 3.4: Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROJECT:  Ecosocial transitions: Exploring the wisdom of our elders

RESEARCHERS:  Wendy Bowles BSW PhD and Heather Boetto BA/BSW M Soc Wk
School of Humanities & Social Sciences
Charles Sturt University
Contact:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Contact Information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Wendy Bowles</td>
<td>Phone: (02) 6933 2249 or email: <a href="mailto:wbowles@csu.edu.au">wbowles@csu.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heather Boetto</td>
<td>Phone: (02) 6933 2949 or email: <a href="mailto:hboetto@csu.edu.au">hboetto@csu.edu.au</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I agree to participate in the above research project and give my consent freely.

I understand that the project will be conducted as described in the Research Information Sheet, a copy of which I have retained.

I understand I can withdraw from the project at any time and do not have to give reason for withdrawing. I also understand that once the data has been analysed it will not be possible to withdraw my individual information.

I consent to participate in the interview.

I understand that my personal information will remain confidential to the researchers unless I request in writing to be identified.

I have had the opportunity to have questions answered to my satisfaction.

Print Name: ____________________________________
Signature: _____________________________________ Date: __________________

NOTE: The Arts Faculty Human Ethics Committee has approved this study. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this project, you may contact the Committee through the Executive Officer:
The Executive Officer
Arts Faculty Human Ethics Committee
Charles Sturt University
Boorooma Street
Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678
Tel: 02 6933 4388
Email: artsfhec@csu.edu.au