A Transformative Eco-Social Model: Challenging Modernist Assumptions in Social Work

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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.

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, Närhi, 2004), an environmental/ecological and social justice value-base (Dominelli, 2013; Peeters, 2012) and emancipatory practice and social action (Boetto and Bell, 2015; Närhi, 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. This ontological base represents
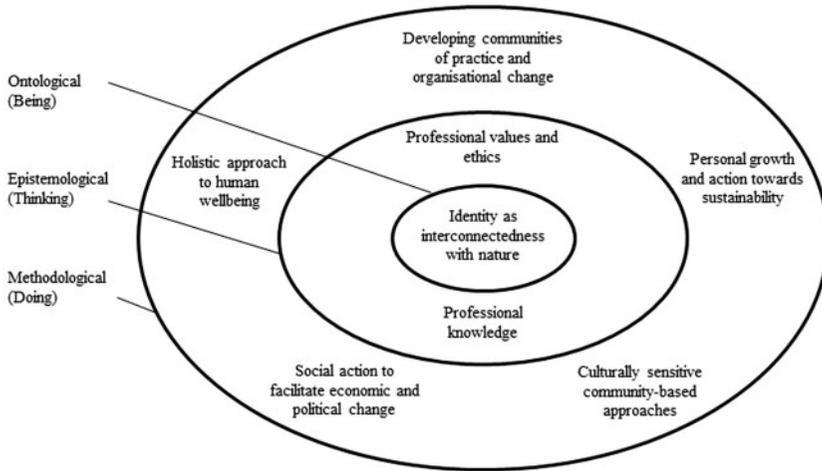
Figure 1: Transformative eco-social model

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

Table 1 Epistemological elements for eco-social work

Eco-social elements	Practice transformations for social workers
Ecological justice	Conceptualising justice within a holistic perspective, and acknowledging justice as important for all living organisms
	Recognition of the disproportionate impacts of the environmental crisis on the world's poorest citizens
Ecological literacy	Knowledge and understanding of nature's systems, ecology and the place of humans within the natural world
	Knowledge about how to promote and sustain healthy ecosystems
	Understanding of the environmental crisis, including human activity that has contributed to this crisis
Indigenous perspectives	Learning from traditional Indigenous cultures about living in harmony with the natural world, based on spiritual beliefs, holism, collectivism and connection with the land
	Recognition that traditional Indigenous cultures established knowledge of the land and used many environmental sustainable practices that have been lost through European invasions
Eco-feminism and criticality	Understanding the connections between the domination of nature and the exploitation of women, largely from patriarchal structures in society
	Recognising the interplay between the environment and the broader social and political systems which cause exploitation, disadvantage and unequal power relationships
Global perspectives	Understanding social work's global citizenship responsibilities, including active efforts towards promoting ecological justice worldwide
	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
	Understanding the disproportionate effects of the environmental crisis on the world's poorest, which are mostly located in the Global South
	Recognition that the behaviours of people in the Global North are largely responsible for causing environmental injustice in the Global South
	Recognition that social work activities and interventions have a local and global impact on people's lives
Sustainability and de-growth	Conceptualising sustainable development holistically to include ecological justice
	Recognition that ecological resources are finite
	Recognition that over-consumption and over-production within industrialised and industrialising economies is depleting Earth's natural resources

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.

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 well-being 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). De-growth 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
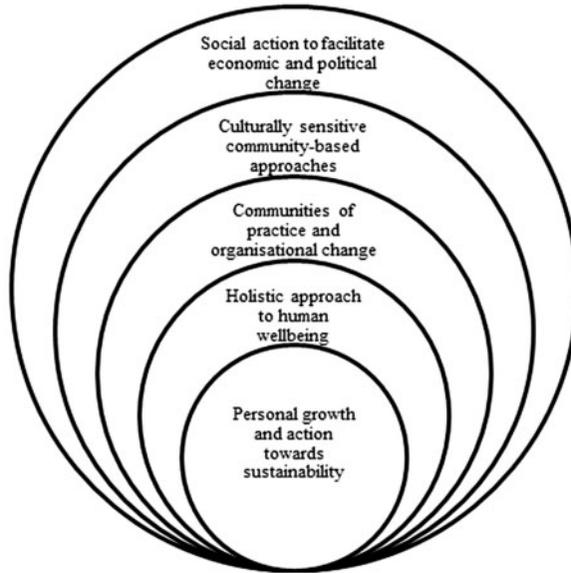
Figure 2: Dimensions of eco-social practice

views on individuals. 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 grass-roots community reconstruction in rural China (Ku and Ma, 2015) and community capacity building in Thailand (Busapathumrong, 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

Table 2 Eco-social practice strategies

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

Eco-social practice strategies

	disaster recovery
	Empower marginalised groups within the community by ensuring their participation and involvement as stakeholders in community planning and development
	Identify local residents and groups with capacity to build sustainability knowledge and skills within the community, e.g. local elders, women
	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
	Work with communities affected by disaster through volunteer or paid employment with organisations that actively engage local residents and organisations
Social action to facilitate economic and political change	Facilitate a public meeting in your local community for members interested in ecological sustainability
	Attend local council/county meetings to advocate for the preservation of 'green' space in your (and other) local areas
	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
	Support public education campaigns that aim to protect the natural environment, including deforestation, decreased mining, use of renewable energy sources
	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

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.

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.

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