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Is social work really greening? Exploring the place of sustainability and environment in social work codes of ethics

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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 every-day practice. Activities associated with climate change manifest across a broad range of issues

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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, Author (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 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 Unites 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 well being in a social context and the well being 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).

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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,

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

Issues of environment	*The code of ethics for social work*, BASW (2012)	*Code of ethics*, NASW (2008)	*Code of ethics*, AASW (2010)
Total mentions of 'environment'	5	3	10
Mentions of environment explicitly relating to socio-cultural environment	0	1	1
Mentions of environment not distinguishing between socio-cultural and natural environment	4	2	4
Mentions of environment explicitly relating to natural environment	1	0	5

BASW: British Association of Social Workers; NASW: National Association of Social Workers; AASW: Australian Association of Social Workers.

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 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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