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ENVIRONMENTALISM AND SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

When it comes to disasters and natural calamities, social work appears to be at the forefront of immediate relief efforts by working alongside emergency service personnel or by providing trauma and emotional support counselling. Despite this expertise in context driven work, social work rarely addresses or attends to human interactions within the natural environment. This review utilises an important reference book released recently called *Environmental Social Work* (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2013) to explain the need for social work and human services professions to become sensitive and central to environmental concerns. *Environmental Social Work* (Gray, et al, 2013) maintains that the profession of social work has been late to engage with environmental movements and has remained exclusively in the arena of the social environment. The time is certainly ripe for a discussion around the possibility of social work's environmental engagement as more consistent writings have appeared over the past decade. This article will briefly review the theoretical orientations of evolving environmental social work practice efforts that are being made to bring this agenda into the profession.

Keywords: social work, environmental aspects, environmentalism, social aspects, environmental social work

INTRODUCTION

Environmental Social Work (Gray, et al, 2013) addresses a critical area - *the environment and social work interface*. It presents a theoretical and practical overview of how social work might respond to environmental factors that affect our societies at micro, meso and macro levels. It is refreshing to see the collection of authors in *Environmental Social Work* (Gray, et al, 2013) significantly enhance the knowledge base between social work and environmental concerns. One of the key features of complex crisis work is that the needs of individuals, families and communities are contingent on context and circumstances. From this perspective, social work claims to use an ecological and systems approach to help people with their problems, yet has a long tradition of ambivalent understanding of social work's interface and relationship to the natural world. Social work practitioners and writers have, over the last two decades, highlighted this neglect, with many authors advancing the argument that a more fully developed and expanded ecological orientation was needed in social work (Berger and Kelly, 1993; Besthorn, 2000; Coates, 2003). Considering the susceptibility of rural communities to natural disasters it is appropriate that this special edition of Rural Society reviews this new text.

Environmental themes in social work practice and scholarship

There is simply no way to approach the 'facts' of environmental social work without the mediating presence of our social and cultural beliefs and our personal experiences (Doherty,

2013). An example I wish to cite relates to the 1984 Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, India. This has resulted in my involvement, along with my students, in the aftermath of a major ecological disaster which left nearly 9000 dead and several thousand permanently blinded and disabled. We were catapulted into 'environmental social work' by taking responsibility for assessing the Bhopal community's immediate recovery needs in the aftermath of the gas tragedy. Following the Bhopal disaster there were a series of actions and reflective conversations, which led to an urban citizens' movement in Hyderabad – my home city. This came about through an alliance of concerned citizens including journalists, social workers, affected citizens and scientists. Collectively, using the Bhopal experience, we decided to look at the city of Hyderabad for 'potential Bhopals'. The resulting report, *City Report, Hyderabad: The State of Art of Physical Environment, A Citizens' Report* (Pulla & Jafri, 1985), was the first of its kind in Asia. It articulated a framework for identifying potential environmental disasters in every city as well as a series of preventative strategies.

My involvement in the Bhopal aftermath and the Hyderabad report caused me to confront the reality of a potential threat arising from poorly monitored industrial activities with the capacity to jeopardise the safety of whole communities and natural eco-systems. This has shaped my thinking and social work practice in the ensuing thirty years, regardless of practice contexts. Post Bhopal, a social work colleague, Nisha Rao, took environmental education into schools and promoted environmental sensitisation programmes at all levels. Her work has been widely recognised and funded across India and gained some international accolades and much valuable funding from the Ministry of Environment, Government of India, recommended by the Indian Prime Minister's office. Similarly, another social work academic from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Medha Patkar took up the cause of involuntary displacement of Indigenous people in response to major water projects. She has, for the last thirty years, championed environmental causes, social justice, poverty issues and the rights of the Indigenous population – in the shaping of major development projects (Pawar & Pulla, 2012). Medha Patkar led the largest and most successful environmental campaigns in Indian? modern history - the Narmada Bachao Andolan. It began with a widespread social work centred developmental agenda originally asking for right compensations for displaced people and finally evolved into questioning the very rationale of large dam projects in India. The above examples highlight that most of social work's spontaneous and sporadic involvement in environmental disasters remain largely an expression of individual commitment and enthusiasm.

Be it floods in Bangladesh or the tsunamis in South East Asia, or our bushfires and floods in Australia, it is important to note that social workers do great crisis work and have always participated in front line services in the aftermath of natural disasters, most commonly in rural areas (Alston, 2007; Pittaway, Bartolomei & Rees, 2007). Similarly, their record with victims of war, refugees in trauma and torture counselling, equally receives positive mention (Voltonen, 2012). This involvement, I believe, stems from a reactive, not proactive, perspective which removes the potential to influence or shape social policy to protect the human and natural environment – especially the over-exploitation of the natural environment.

While social workers are renowned for their articulated holistic practice approach often at the frontline of responses to complex and the profession has a penchant with the 'person in environment' metaphor, in reality this interest to date is devoid of any pronounced interest in the ecological domain and human interactions within the natural environment. However, in a recent editorial to the *International Journal of Social Work*, Lena Dominelli and Simon

Hackett commented that the International Association of Schools of Social Work, (IASSW), the International Council of Social Welfare, (ICSW) and the International Federation of Social Welfare (IFSW), “has begun to produce key documents – the definition of social work; the ethical documents, the Global Standards, and to devise ‘The Agenda’ that would enable members of these organisations to move forward together in common causes” (Dominelli and Hackett, 2012, p.449). This single common cause across all continents seems to be asking for more deliberate, planned and sustained practice of social work on environmental issues. As a profession that subscribes to the perspective of ‘person in environment’, I see the work of Gray, Coates and Hetherington (2013) as an opportunity for the profession to expand and develop a green social work paradigm as part of its core philosophy and advance its best practice. It appears that there is a renewed thrust to develop some theoretical considerations that imply environmental social work practice that directs prudent interventions into the physical environment and at the same time nurtures our connectedness to the entire planet and all of life.

A brief beyond crisis work

Environmental realities in the more recent past have played significant havoc in our societies and rural communities. A profession like social work that has its daily business in dealing with every day systemic dysfunctions seems to be content finding adjustments for the individuals to ‘fit in’ or occasionally fix some systemic issues. A time to pull its socks up and to re-evaluate its modernist foundations, and to shift from the primacy of therapy, damage control and rehabilitation, with a view to recognising social work’s essential connection to all of nature – a nature including all people and all life on the planet - seems to have arrived. As noted, social work has a holistic practice approach that takes into account the person in environment context and is often practiced at the frontline of complex crises, including natural disasters, terrorist attacks and war zones (Dominelli 2012). Despite this involvement very rarely have social workers, individually or as a profession, raised issues about human and non-human environment interaction, especially the ethics of human exploitation of nature. Despite a range of environmental factors that are impacting on individuals and societies around the world, and within the Australian context, and the new code of ethics recognition given to the environmental responsibilities of social workers, there appears to be a haphazard approach to inclusion of environmental issues into social work around Australia.

One of the major discussions in social work and development discourse is around the western view as to what constitutes development. A healthy economy according to the dominant model of development is described as an expanding economy in which more material goods are produced, consumed and thrown away (Clark, 1989). Certainly this mainstream argument is unlikely to be acceptable to social work because, as Beck (1996) contends, wealth driven ecological destruction is a major global threat. While we recognise that high economic growth has resulted in consumption patterns that are often equated to happiness, we also need to recognise that this temporary happiness in turn has brought in new values of ruthless competition, high levels of individualism and increased attraction to materialism. The term ‘homo economicus’ means that economic well-being is primary and leads to well-being in other aspects of life. Worse still, the prioritising of economic gain (development model) over environmental protection and sustainability, a phenomenon of western societies over the past two centuries, is being replicated largely unabated in Third World countries. Examples such

as the Bhopal gas leak tragedy, its disastrous effects on human safety and the natural environment, keep reminding us that there ought to be learning from the past. Ironically, the western model of development also ushers the unloading of goods and commodities of destructive lifestyle habits, such as drugs and tobacco trade, amongst others, into the developing world. This appears as a glaring example of shifting environmental and health hazards from one region to the other. This is a reality of tragic disparities in valuing the worth and dignity of human life – that is, a much-valued life in affluent developed societies as opposed to continually devalued considerations for human life in less developed societies.

A need to develop a dialogue that expands the social work professional position on environmental issues, as the profession continues to work with poor and marginalised peoples in their habitats, and a further impetus to re-focus social work in the environmental context, is reflected in a statement from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012). The IFSW suggests that requirements for a stable world order ought to include mutual recognition of human rights, a more equitable economic order, the enforcement of world treaties for a sustainable environment and a more determined search for non-violent solutions to national and international conflicts. The statement points to directions towards environmental ethics for social work in the context of social work's responsibility to the non-human world.

Certainly the gulf between 'environmental activism' and 'social work' may have resulted partly from a lack of an enabling ethos within the social work profession to connect the two; and may also be due to a stereotypical understanding that environmental activism is largely conservation centred. While some social workers have come to grips with environmental issues and connections to social work, this phenomenon has not been pervasive. Often working with an exclusively social understanding of environment, much of the social work content is devoid of any deliberate attempts to include environmental issues in the training and orientation of social workers. As social workers progressively appreciate that context is a prime determinant for quality of life, the deteriorating natural world is very likely to become part of social workers' concern. For example, the impact of recent worldwide attention to climate change, a series of natural disasters, and increased understanding of issues around environmental justice has put the environment, sustainability, and human well-being in the spotlight (Martinez-Alier, 2002; Sandler & Pezzullo, 2007). It will be interesting to see if the current boom of literature in social work, to which the book under review readily belongs, will rectify this tendency as the profession continues to work with its frameworks with poor, marginalised and vulnerable peoples in their habitat, and assists in developing a broad framework to move into the environmental arena.

Environmental Social Work (Gray, et al. 2013) allows exploration of what environmental social work is and how it can be put into practice. It focuses on theoretical orientations, discussing ecological and social justice, sustainability, spirituality and the context of human rights. It also offers case studies of evolving environmental social work practice. The case studies emerge from a range of areas from urban gardens and community organizing, to practice with those affected by climate change. *Environmental Social Work* (Gray, et al. 2013) provides an integrated theoretical and practical overview of why and how social work might respond to environmental factors affecting the societies and people they work with at international, national, local and individual levels. In doing so, a series of questions are examined. Is the term *environmental sustainability* somewhat of an overused cliché? How would we reach a sustainable society? What would a 'new paradigm' in relation to

sustainable development look like? What are some of the questions that social workers who value critical theory need to raise, and attempt to find answers to, in their communities of practice. The additional trend that we notice today is a near unanimous plea for acceptance of spirituality as part of social work practice. An implication of this for the profession is to assist development of human compassion, empathy, tender-heartedness and unhesitating cooperation that remain the core forms of human response in all societies. This would provide opportunities for individuals, groups and communities to explore and set limitations on the type and level of materialistic goals.

Increasing social work's environmental interventions

The practical ways of increasing the social work interface with the natural environment has been presented in a number of ways in this book. Recognising earth's resources to be finite, Gray et al. (2013) suggest attitudinal and lifestyle changes that are required to curb humans' profligate habits of energy use, environmentally destructive mining and industrial practices, and greed driven consumerism. The possibilities of social work intervention in the realm of lifestyles is suggested through counselling and individually oriented mental health and personal growth initiatives aimed at changing consumption oriented values. Similarly, the concern that development ought to meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs, is widely accepted. Ideally, food security must exist in sufficient quantities of safe, nutritious foods available to all peoples, at all times. The suggested approach to social work interventions to deal with the above two concerns at the micro level is to encourage community gardens in low income neighbourhoods and through educational initiatives around food consumption patterns in neighbourhoods. Interesting case studies include social work involvement in raising community gardens, creative community organising and environmental activism in New York (Shepard, 2013).

There are also suggestions at the meso-level that environmental justice initiatives to confront the ill effects of globalisation are required. What appears to be needed is adherence to a model of development that reduces disaster vulnerabilities on the one hand, and improves developments in vulnerable social political and economic processes that will mitigate and improve social work responses on the other hand. Climate change as a rights issue is advanced by Frank Tester (2013) who argues that a human rights framework would be able to protect the health and well being of the planet as it would set out its arguments against the current growth-profit model. The increasing recognition that the human species is deeply embedded within the natural world is certainly gratifying, a development that seeks to redress the anthropocentrism that has characterised social work's worldview until now. A largely unacknowledged moral claim is centred on our fellow creatures - the non-human animals with which the world is also shared - and the need to improve human orientations to the exploration of flora and fauna.

Amongst other writings is an important contribution by Lena Dominelli exploring social work education for disaster relief work. Dominelli (2013) suggests that communities need to be prepared for natural and human-made disasters because these can strike anywhere, regardless of location, culture or history, once again suggesting a role of community work and education. The literature on disaster management reveals vulnerable populations tend to be the ones suffering most. How can social workers play important roles in disaster

management response? Incorporation of disaster relief and preparation is certainly worth considering in the curriculum of social work.

Clearly, twenty-first century problems require social work educators and practitioners to achieve linkages to locality specific issues that acknowledge the interdependency between these two realms of practice and between people and their social and physical environments. The presence of poverty and people languishing even below contestable poverty lines must also be considered (Dominelli & Hackett, 2012). Asia offers interesting contrasts in that some countries like Singapore and China have attained high economic growth rates while rejecting the western notions of human rights. Other countries in the Asia Pacific region, despite their economic achievement, struggle to hide their lack of progress in either human rights or economic development.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have established some benchmarks for development. While human rights have been mentioned as integral to development there is no monitoring of human rights achievements as there are for other aspects like education and health. There is a narrow approach to understanding human rights in the West as civil and political contexts. Countries like Singapore have achieved both the MDGs and have improved aspects of human rights by advancing education, health and gender equalities and are becoming exemplary for the setting of targets in other Asian countries (Caballero-Anthony, 2006). Certainly, the continuation of people living in abject poverty ought to be regarded as a violation of human rights both locally and globally, and hence a concern of social justice and social work.

Equalitarian justice

Fred Besthorn, while examining ecological and social justice, outlines deep ecological social work as a foundation to revitalize how social work would respond to environmental matters, particularly those affecting disadvantaged populations (Besthorn, 2013). His firm belief that all justice is ultimately ecological can be seen as an extension of the distributional and utilitarian aspects of modern western ideas of social justice. He emphasises the minimisation of environmental harms and an equitable distribution of environmental benefits or goods, such as protecting clean water, maintaining species integrity and ensuring climate stability, amongst other things (Besthorn, 2013). Although more akin to the views of Besthorn, the central themes of the work by Gray, et al. (2013) and the other scholars in this book seem to suggest that social work needs to work with the notions of social justice from a rights-based framework, focusing on justice as relating to human rights and needs.

The authors in this volume recognise that current environmental crises are clearly issues of environmental and social justice concerns. The future will tell how much anyone in current social work academia is prepared to do with the inspiration from this and other emerging books in this genre, and how they would transform the course of social work for the future. Alternatively, some might start with a minimalist agenda of intentionally redefining the 'person in environment' paradigm to robustly incorporate the natural environment, so that we can set an agenda to improve our micro- meso-macro practice.

CONCLUSION

Environmentalism and Social Work will also appeal to those beyond the fields of social work, social policy, sociology and human geography. It powerfully reveals how environmental

issues need to be developed as an integral part of social work's remit, if it is to retain its currency in the modern world and emphasise its relevance to the social issues that societies have to resolve in the twenty-first century. Before any stern steps can be undertaken by the profession of social work towards building our presence in the environmental arena, we need to first turn our attention to building our understanding of what does it mean to work with environmental issues as practitioners and also as academics. This book provides a succinct overview of the various themes that would require constant revisiting if one was to delve into the interface of social work and environmental issues. *Environmental Social Work* will sufficiently inform and arouse further curiosity of social workers to pursue and incorporate notions of eco-social work and sustainability both into our training as well as our practice.

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