The most recent version of the Australian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics includes substantial reference to social workers' professional responsibilities for environmental awareness and advocacy. This article reports on a qualitative study of 20 Australian environmentally-conscious social workers from a variety of fields of practice. The study found that while there was a high level of awareness of the relevance of environmental issues for social work practice, participants reported ...
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The Environment: A Private Concern or a Professional Practice Issue for Australian Social Workers?

by

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Abstract

The most recent version of the AASW Code of Ethics includes substantial reference to social workers’ professional responsibilities for environmental awareness and advocacy. This article reports on a qualitative study of 20 Australian environmentally-conscious social workers from a variety of fields of practice. The study found that while there was a high level of awareness of the relevance of environmental issues for social work practice, participants reported professional and organisational constraints that prevented them from aligning their environmental concerns with their professional practice. The findings suggest that pro-environmental views and actions may not yet be accepted as a legitimate aspect of social work practice, despite strong recognition of the links between social justice, human rights, social work, and the environment in the AASW Code of Ethics.
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Despite a growing interest in recent years, the overall lack of reference to environmental issues in social work literature to date indicates that the environment may be viewed as largely irrelevant to the interests of the social work profession and to the day-to-day occupational efforts of most social workers. Yet the nexus of “social justice”, which is seen to have a legitimate place in social work’s professional arena, and “environmental justice”, which does not, is a broad one. These two fields are linked in a number of ways. Most notably, it is becoming more and more obvious that negative environmental consequences are experienced disproportionately by the most vulnerable members of society (Warren, 2000; Plumwood, 2002), the very people with whom social workers most often work (Coates, 2003; Zapf, 2009).

It is now beyond doubt that the Earth and its inhabitants are in the midst of an environmental crisis (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2007), and this environmental crisis is rife with social justice issues. For Beck (2010):

*Social inequalities and climate change are two sides of the same coin. One cannot conceptualize inequalities and power any longer without taking the consequences of climate change into account, and one cannot conceptualize climate change without taking its impacts on social inequalities and power into account.* (p. 257)

Climate change, in the form of global warming, is now recognised as an outstanding threat for human societies in the current environmental crisis (World Bank, 2012). As a result, some worthwhile implications are emerging for the social work profession, which has had a long-standing focus on social justice. These implications include factors such as professional role recognition of the dangers for society of ignoring the ecological crisis, and development of a theory and practice framework that is explicit about the place of nature and ecology in research and practice. In order to
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ensure the relevance of social work in an age of environmental crisis, it is time to reconsider definitions of the broad domain of social work practice.

Literature Review

Social work is a relatively young profession, born out of the modern age (Coates, 2003) and only defined itself as a profession in the early twentieth century (Alston & McKinnon, 2005). Although early social work pioneers such as Jane Addams considered the natural environment to be an important aspect of health and wellbeing (Bartlett, 2003), social work quickly developed an emphasis on the socio-cultural environment to the exclusion of nature as a practice and research interest (Zapf, 2009; Coates, 2003; McKinnon, 2012). The natural environment was virtually ignored in Western social work literature until Berger and Kelly proposed an ecological model of practice in 1993. Their model includes a twelve point Ecological Credo for social workers, based on the premise that human and environmental welfare are inextricably linked (Berger & Kelly, 1993).

Berger and Kelly’s ideas reflected the findings of the United Nations’ World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED, 1987), which, for the first time at such a high level of intergovernmental cooperation, described the links between social, economic and environmental systems as “inextricable” (Berger & Kelly, 1993, p. 441). Their article heralded a new age of social work interest in the environment, which in quick succession saw inclusion of words such as environment, sustainability, and ecology in statements from social work representative bodies such as the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), through its International Policy Statement on Globalisation and the Environment (IFSW, undated). The American National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2000) also devised a policy statement giving recognition to human- environmental interaction:
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Protecting people and the natural environment through sustainable development is arguably the fullest realisation of the person-in-environment perspective. The compatibility of sustainable development and the person-in-environment perspective is a firm theoretical foundation from which to apply macro-level social work practice to person-natural environmental problems. (p. 105)

Australian social workers have demonstrated some interest in environmental issues. In 2001, a survey of members of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) found that eleven per cent of members identified ecological sustainability as one of the top ten policy issues on which they would like the AASW to focus (AASW, 2001). Soon after, the AASW made a change to the Code of Ethics that introduced the concept of “social development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare” as an expressed value for social workers (AASW, 2002).

Further changes to the AASW Code of Ethics in 2010 introduced much stronger language around the centrality of the environment to social work practice, and included statements such as:

- The commitment and aims of social work involves “the pursuit and achievement of equitable access to social, economic, environmental and political resources” (Section 1.2).
- The practice of social work occurs “at the interface between people and their social, cultural and physical environments” (Section 1.3).
- Social work “takes place in a context whereby social systems have a mutually interdependent relationship with the natural environment” (Section 3.3).
- The social work profession holds that “each person has a right to wellbeing, self-fulfilment and self-determination consistent with... a sustainable environment” (Section 3.1).
- As a social justice consideration, the social work profession “promotes the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing” (Section 3.2).
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- As part of their commitment to social justice and human rights, 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” (Section 5.1.3, clause c);
  - “meet their responsibilities to society by engaging in action to promote societal and environmental wellbeing” (Section 5.1.3, clause j); and
  - “advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society” (Section 5.1.3, clause m).

As a result of these inclusions in the AASW Code of Ethics, questions arise as to how social workers engage with the natural environment, how they are including these responsibilities in practice, and how employer organisations are receiving and operationalising these newfound ethical responsibilities of social workers. There has been a limited amount of empirical research in the past about the ways in which social workers are able to meld environmental concerns with professional practice. In 2001, Marlow and Van Rooyen published the results of an exploratory comparative study about social workers in the USA and South Africa in regard to environmental issues in professional practice. They concluded that “The environmental crisis is growing in momentum and if social workers are to be responsible to clients and communities they need to make a planned and concerted effort to systematically address both theoretical and practical responses” (p.253), as their study could find little evidence that this was already happening.

Narhi (2004) found that social workers lacked confidence in negotiating good environmental outcomes for communities because they viewed themselves as lacking environmental expertise.
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This outcome gave rise to Narhi’s questions about “boundary-negotiated knowledge” and her recommendation for social workers to see themselves as having the right to speak on these issues.

Congruence is an important concept in social work practice, and is considered to be an aspect of personal and professional integrity (Healy, 2005). Congruence between one’s personal and professional self may be seen as an embodiment of the integration of values and ethical practices. In this way, the values and standards espoused in professional documents, such as the Code of Ethics, become standards not just for professional practice, but also for everyday life.

Confidentiality, respect, and valuing of self-determination, for example, are professional social work practices spelled out in the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) that may also be expected to be manifest in a social worker’s personal practices. In this way, the boundaries between a social worker’s professional, or public, life and their personal, or private, life may be quite blurred. Social workers’ sense of purpose in practice is profoundly shaped by the formal base of their profession; especially the shared values that help forge a common identity despite wide diversity in practice contexts (Healy 2005). More evidence is needed about the lived experience of social workers in regard to environmental issues, most especially to examine the role and identity conflicts that may arise in regard to the environmental aspects of the AASW Code of Ethics.

The main objectives of the study were: (a) to ascertain the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance, or otherwise, of the environment to social work practice; and (b) to explore factors that enable or constrain social workers’ efforts to enact environmental values and issues in practice.

Method
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Twenty social workers were interviewed in this qualitative study, which was approved by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research committee. A qualitative approach was planned because of the exploratory nature of the study and the very limited amount of existing empirical data on this topic (Alston & Bowles 2003). Denzin and Lincoln (2008) describe qualitative research as a situated activity that locates the observer in the world, and consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. It involves the studied use and collection of empirical materials that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individuals’ lives, and requires the use of a wide variety of interconnected interpretive practices to gain a better understanding of the subject matter at hand (Gergen, Gergen & Lincoln 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

Participants and Sampling

Participants were recruited in three ways. Four participants were social workers known to the researcher, and were invited to be involved in the study. An advertisement about the study was placed in the New South Wales (NSW), Victorian, and Hunter AASW branch newsletter. Approximately one-quarter of the study participants were recruited from respondents to the advertisement. There were no respondents from Victoria. The majority of participants were recruited from a snowball technique whereby previously interviewed participants passed on researcher details to their social work friends and colleagues who subsequently made contact with the researcher. Ten participants (that is, half of all participants) were members of the AASW. All participants self-identified prior to interview as being concerned about both social justice and environmental issues. It was planned that interviews would be conducted until such point as no new data was emerging, a point known in grounded research as ‘saturation’ (Glaser, 2002).

Measures and Procedure

The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews, averaging one and a half hours each, with participants from NSW, South Australia, Queensland, and the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). All interviews were conducted by the author using a set of 10 ‘trigger’ questions,
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which included questions about participants’ current work and role, their historical and current relationship with nature and the environment, and their views about the relevance (or otherwise) of the environment to social work generally and to their professional role in particular. A grounded approach (Glaser, 2002; Strauss and Corbin, 1998) to data collection was employed, which involves a continuous process of defining and re-defining concepts and relationships between concepts (Charmaz and Lincoln, 2005) with the aim of developing theory from the ground up. Interviews were transcribed and then managed using NVivo (QSR International 2008) qualitative data management system.

Data Analysis

Transcribed interviews were coded initially in a line-by-line process of ‘open’ coding (Glaser, 2002) wherein data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for differences and similarities. The coding process then moved into selective coding and finally axial coding (Glaser 2002), thus grouping data into themes that became more and more refined. No new data emerged after the fourteenth interview, thus indicating that saturation point had been reached, so twenty interviews were considered ample for this purpose.

Results

Demographic Data

Participants in this study ranged in age from 29 to 70 years, with an average age of 43.7 years. Of the 20 participants, 18 were female, reflecting the overall gender distribution of social workers in Australia (ABS, 2006). Participants’ years of practice experience since graduating as a social worker ranged from over 40 years to less than 3 years, and their fields of practice included health, child welfare, education, policy, and community services. None of the participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and 2 were from non-English speaking backgrounds – both European.
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1 shows the occupation or field of practice for each study participant. Please note that names have been changed in this report to protect the privacy of participants.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Major Themes

Four major themes emerged from the data.

Personal Actions and Awareness

Having pre-identified as concerned about environmental issues, it is unsurprising that all participants expressed strong views about the environment as important element of their awareness and their actions. Some felt very strongly about their personal attachment to nature, such as:

I think when I have an experience of beauty - be it the bush, be it the environment, be it music – it connects me back to the spiritual world and it’s almost a yearning and a wanting to be there. (Brenda)

At a base level I think I would start with a spiritual attitude or a spiritual interpretation of the environment. I think the environment is to me sacred, and it’s a way of being. (Ruby)

Almost all participants had made changes to their own lifestyle as a result of their concern for the environment, including efforts to recycle, commuting by bicycle, limiting resource use, involvement in permaculture, and taking part in environmental campaigns. For example, Claire said that the changes she had made to her lifestyle were all about trying to achieve “An approach of simplicity and non-materialism [and], related to that, respect for the environment and ways for us to not violate the environment”, (Claire).
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Worries about the predominance of economic and consumerist values were expressed by 15 participants. Most commented on the expansion of industrialisation and the resultant impacts on nature. They expressed views such as: “I’m very concerned about what’s happening to the Earth and the environment and how capitalist industrialist approaches are devastating the environment throughout the world”, (Claire), “I worry about how we are going with the populations that we have got and the impact that has upon the environment”, (Harriet), “People thought that resources were infinite and that the Earth could absorb all the garbage we threw at it”, (Freya), and “We are running out of all kinds of fuels and things and we are damaging the environment in the process”, (Stella).

Social and Environmental Connections

A second major theme among participants was that of eco-social connections: the perceived relevance of ecological-environmental issues to the participant’s life as a social worker. Comments by participants that related to this theme ranged from links between social and environmental justice through to the therapeutic effects of nature. However, the common thread was a continuing recognition of the links between social and environmental issues, as shown in the following quotes from Taylor, Ruby, and Stella:

*I think there is a direct link with the way social workers work, their value system and their beliefs to protecting the environment, and social workers have to understand that without a connection to the environment, without making the environment a priority in relation to our goals, aims, mission statements, whatever – unless we do that there is no use in us working anymore anyway. It connects to so many of our values and our history*, (Taylor).
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I think there are, increasingly, numbers of people who are left out of society and who are made to suffer the consequences of environmental degradation, (Ruby).

It is still very much that struggle between economic issues and sustainability. I guess the focus has been on economic systems, so it is like “social” and “environmental” are coming in a few steps behind. They are not on equal playing fields, (Stella).

Environmental Action and Concerns in the Workplace

In terms of operationalising their concerns at work, many of the social workers in this study had introduced some recycling and resource reduction practice changes in their workplace. For the most part, participants focused on the sorts of practical changes that might reduce the ecological footprint of the places where they work. This included activities such as: minimal use of the dishwasher in the staff kitchen and vigilance to ensure it is only used when fully loaded; requesting recycled paper for printing or photocopying; reduced use of polystyrene cups; and even providing a set of crockery for the office “so that people don’t throw stuff away” (Claire). When the workplace was not becoming eco-friendly quickly enough, Taylor took matters into his own hands: “I have done some little things like, before most offices had those little recycling bins, I made up a few- just built a few and stuck them around the office, (Taylor). For others, it was more of a matter of trying to be true to one’s self: “I try to make my values part of my workplace”, (Tilly).

Ruby also made a link with sustainability more generally, and sees this as a major focus in her work:

It is important to think about sustainability within everything that we do, and that in all modes of practice, ranging from clinical practice to community development, research and policy, we should ask ourselves “How sustainable is this practice I’m going to
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engage in? How are other things linked to the person that I’m working with? How is food and nutrition, and the place where they live, how do they contribute to people’s poverty and people’s situation?”, (Ruby).

For Ruby, bringing such attitudes into practice relies, partly at least, on social workers...

...seeing ourselves as citizens rather than as professionals, because a rigid personal-professional dichotomy would not allow social workers to see, for example, that the things we buy have a direct impact on the people that we work with, (Ruby).

Several participants thought it obvious that social workers generally would have an interest in sustainability and the environment and made comments such as: “Social workers generally, because of our values, and other people who work with us, are quite likely to be people who are concerned for the environment”, (Tegan).

Enacting Environmental Values: Constraints Upon Participants

Despite a general sense that participants are striving for a sense of congruence, or wholeness, between their personal and professional self, the majority expressed frustration at their inability to achieve this alignment. Athena, for example, described a feeling that “there is always this separation of public and private” when she considers the range of her interests and concerns. Likewise, when talking about what is relevant and what is not relevant in her work role, Brenda expressed tentativeness around professional boundaries with the comment:

You just have to be very careful - it’s an opportunity to live out some of our values around respectful communication, around consideration and thoughtfulness around others and so on - but otherwise you have to be a bit careful, (Brenda).
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Another participant also described a sense of care around professional boundaries at work: “There’s a fairly strong pressure to not be seen as rocking the boat or doing things too differently, being seen as odd, a stirrer, all those things”, (Claire). Claire expressed a wary approach to including her environmental concerns in her work despite the fact that she saw her team leader as “Somebody who would probably vote Green”, and presumably therefore as someone who may have been relatively supportive of green, or environmental, values.

For the participants in this study, whose personal interest and values showed a clear concern for environmental problems and their impact on society, there appeared to be a quite sharply defined boundary around their personal and professional selves. Participants expressed, in the main, that their concerns about the environment did not have a place at work, presumably a major aspect of the participants’ public life. This sharp divide between the personal and professional values possibly helps to explain why this group saw themselves as having a generally low level of identification with the social work profession as a whole.

Participants described a general lack of interest about environmental concerns among their co-workers, managers, and team leaders. Lucy reported she had tried on several occasions to implement some better environmental practices in her workplace, but found:

My experience is that it’s like whistling in the wind until and unless anyone in a powerful enough management role either supports you or an edict comes from on high to say that suddenly we are going to have green bins, or we are going to cut down on waste in this way or that way, (Lucy).

The sense of powerlessness that Lucy expressed was also expressed by other participants who were concerned about practices in their workplace. Claire noted that, although she felt strongly about
environmental matters it was also something “I haven’t felt comfortable about being too overt about”. Likewise, when Claire spoke of the manager who she felt was supportive of environmental issues, she identified the support as “something I’ve picked up...So it’s not really overt, but stuff around her values, so therefore the support”. Claire’s words infer a perception that the manager of whom she speaks also acts from a position of constraint.

A variety of role and organisational constraints came through each and every one of the participants’ descriptions of their experiences at work. Brenda mentioned a previous workplace where she’d introduced some new ideas about environmentalism in the workplace, but “got rapped over the knuckles and got into trouble about that”. While Brenda said she felt able to get away with more expression of pro-environmental views in her current workplace, she also said “I do feel, and some others of us feel, a bit nervous”.

Freya described being “constrained by hospital policy to a certain extent and constrained by lack of resources, lack of time. And it’s a little bit political as times, I think, too”. Organisational culture can be a strong force in keeping things as they are. Freya commented:

...my impression [is] that we, as social workers, do not have autonomy to speak up about issues that concern us, particularly as it relates to the health system. Off our own bat we could go and talk about environmental issues or whatever, however we cannot speak as workers in Health. That is certainly my understanding. And if we see injustices in the system, or whatever, I know there have been a couple of social workers who have spoken up about things, and it hasn’t gone down that well, (Freya).

This quote from Freya raises two issues. Firstly, this kind of constraint in regard to public representation is not unusual - employees generally do not have the right to speak publicly in ways
that might be construed as speaking on behalf of their employing organisation, whether public or private. However, Freya’s final point about social workers who have spoken up about things “…and it hasn’t gone down well” is a constraint for all employees of an organisation where there is implicit pressure from within the organisation to not be critical or to agitate for change. For social workers, who also have a professional role that includes advocacy for and on behalf of the people with whom they work, this could represent an ethical dilemma. For some participants and their colleagues, the organisational constraints have become overwhelming. Freya implied that it is just too difficult to raise objections about organisational constraints when she said:

*Some of the social workers who have been here a bit longer, they wouldn’t even contemplate challenging the system, because their attitude is that they need a job and they don’t want to risk that. And I guess that’s part of it – you need to survive in a system. And if you want to keep your job you do have to, maybe not play by the rules, but at least look as if you are, (Freya).*

It appears, as least in Freya’s workplace, that both the formal and informal rules and norms around speaking up are affecting social workers’ decisions about whether to raise issues that may be perceived as difficult ones. This is particularly true when it is expected that senior managers will not approve of what is being said. It seems that direct observation of what has happened to other social workers who have spoken up can have a silencing effect. For others who did not have a direct observation or experience of silencing, the stories of what has happened to co-workers who have “made waves” becomes part of the organisational culture through story and implication. In an organisation where “you need to survive” (Freya) and “at least look as if” (Freya) you are playing by the rules, some issues are seen as not worth losing one’s job over. Where a particular profession, such as social work, is already experiencing difficulty being valued, those workers are not likely to push for an expansion of their role. This is particularly apparent in a secondary work setting such as
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a hospital, and possibly even more so in any organisation where there is already strong demarcation around “core” and “non-core” business.

Marti identified organisational cultural barriers as impacting on her role, and on her sense of congruence between her personal and professional life, when she referred to unwritten rules:

*There’s pressure around, yeah, the pressure to do things the way they’ve always been done, or doing things the way other people have done them, that prevent a fit between what I do and what I believe,* (Marti).

Marti’s words encapsulated the feeling that many of the participants conveyed, indicating participants may have been trying to move towards a sense of integrity that they associated with “wholeness”, or were at least aware of a gap between what they believe and what they were able to do in their professional practice.

**Discussion**

The majority of participants in this study expressed a wish to see a different kind of social work emerge, so that social work will be in a much better position as a profession to assist in dealing with environmental issues as they impact upon people. The latest changes to the AASW Code of Ethics would, no doubt, be enthusiastically received by the study participants. Questions still remain, though, about the ways in which Australian social workers’ newfound environmental responsibilities will be incorporated into their professional identity and practice.

This study began with the twin aims of ascertaining the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of the environment to social work practice, and exploring factors that may enable or constrain social workers’ efforts to enact environmental values and issues in practice.
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The findings indicate that this particular cohort of environmentally-conscious social workers have focussed their professional environmental efforts on advocacy around institutional factors. For example, participants have managed to introduce some changes around the use of physical resources and behavioural changes related to use of water and paper. They have effectively introduced recycling practices when their employer organisations were slow to act. However, participants expressed an overall sense of powerlessness about environmentalism in their professional practice. There was little evidence that these participants were able to incorporate their personal environmental values into their social work practice in service provision, or in clinical practices related to empowerment or social transformation. In fact, the inferred general view of participants was that they had no right to “impose” their personal views on clients, groups or communities with whom they worked. The 2010 AASW Code of Ethics makes it clear that social workers not only have a right, they have an ethical responsibility to take account of environmental factors in their professional work and to take action where appropriate.

Early environmental social work writers explored ways in which direct social work practice might take environmental values into account. For example, it was suggested that the relationship between lifestyle and personal satisfaction could be explored creatively not only in individual and family therapy (Penton 1993), but also through workshops, groups, and public education methods (Hoff and Polack 1993). Social workers’ skills in fostering human relationships were seen as providing them with the opportunity to emphasise “being” (that is, creative expression, cultivation of personal relationships, altruistic involvement in one’s community) over “having” (acquisitive or addictive behaviours that seek satisfaction through acquiring things) (Penton, 1993).

For social workers who work in situations where their frameworks and their context are consistent, there would usually be relatively little role and values conflict. However, the participants in this
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study expressed a relatively high level of conflict, and it is evident that the lack of congruence between participant social workers’ personal and institutional frameworks is a source of conflict for them in relation to their professional role and identity. Specifically, the lack of recognition in the institutional context (that is, their professional role and identity embedded in their employment role and their broader professional identity) for the environmental-ecological concerns that are central to participants’ personal framework.

Developments that incorporated identity issues as a crucial aspect of social work practice have prompted discourses about the significance of fluidity and multiplicity in identities. Incorporation of identity politics into social work has arguably been responsible for giving the direction of social work a postmodern turn (Fook & Pease, 1999; Dominelli, 2007). Postmodern theories have gained a strong foothold in the profession of social work but their tenets have been strongly contested by those demanding a more complex understanding of identity. Thompson (2002) and Dominelli (2007), among others, called for social work theory to link personal elements with the structural or collective elements of human existence alongside the individual ones, together with the idea that what holds people together are what they share in common or their sameness.

Participants in this study appeared to be experiencing a contested state of identity as they grappled with embodiment of a professional identity that does not provide a clear and cohesive discourse that is inclusive of the their personal environmental values. Participants’ personal identity frameworks clearly reference the environment, and they identify a number of ways in which the environment is relevant to their professional roles. Yet the majority of participants had not found a way to successfully incorporate their environmental understanding and concerns into their professional practice.
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Strategies are available to assist current and future generations of Australian social workers to incorporate their environmental responsibilities into their professional practice. Firstly, the curriculum of professional entry social work programs should be reviewed, and appropriate theory-practice development incorporated as appropriate. Some Australian universities have already introduced relevant socio-environmental subjects, but this is limited to around one-quarter of all Australian social work courses (McKinnon, 2010) and needs to be much more widespread. Secondly, a continuing professional education program will be needed to raise awareness among practising social workers. Finally, further empirical research should be undertaken to gain a clearer understanding of both the constraints upon Australian social workers and in what ways they are able to successfully enact their environmental ethical responsibilities. This study was a small one; a much larger study is needed to gain further evidence of social workers lived experiences and their understandings of these issues.

Limitations of the Research

As a study limited to interviews with 20 participants, there is no claim to make that this study is generalisable across the social work population. Nevertheless, the findings will be of interest to social work educators, practitioners, students, and policy-makers as they consider questions around the relevance of nature and environmental concerns to social work. As readers make their decision about the usefulness of this study, they should take into account the following limitations:

- although a wide range of social work fields of practice were represented among the study participants (especially health, which is the biggest employer of social workers in Australia), there were no participants from some of the other larger fields, such as income support (Centrelink), disability, and housing; and
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the study participants all resided and worked within only four states / territories: New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory.

Conclusion

All participants in this study were aware of and expressed commitment to the AASW Code of Ethics, but while they were able to introduce or support organisational environmental actions (such as recycling), they found it extremely difficult to meld their environmental values with professional service provision, especially in clinical or casework roles. The findings suggest that pro-environmental views and actions are not yet incorporated as a legitimate aspect of social work practice, despite strong recognition of the links between social justice, human rights, social work and the environment in the AASW Code of Ethics. Participants experienced perceived pressure against incorporation of environmental values into their professional role. Some participants perceived their colleagues and managers as not regarding the natural environment as relevant to social work practice. The combination of these factors means that participants can be effectively silenced in the workplace in regard to an issue that is personally very important to them, and which they see as relevant to professional practice. This study shows evidence that a sharp divide seems to exist between participants’ professional life and their personal realm, with the environment and nature currently relegated very much to the personal sphere. It appears some time away yet before environmental values will be able to be move out of the private realm and be incorporated into professional social work practice at all levels.
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References


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Table 1: Summary of participants by name and occupation/field of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code name</th>
<th>Occupation/ field of practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Family law mediator</td>
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<tr>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>Group facilitator / counsellor</td>
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<tr>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>Retired academic</td>
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<td>Ruby</td>
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<td>Freya</td>
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<td>Officer</td>
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<td>Athena</td>
<td>Child Protection counsellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tilly</td>
<td>Manager Comm’ty Legal Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>Retired Executive (Justice portfolio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>Social Worker (youth policy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>