Towards a new consciousness of ‘environment’ for the social work profession: Perceptions of a sample of environmentally-conscious social workers in Australia

by

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In the ecological parallel to the Titanic story, we have reached the stage in the narrative where we have received the iceberg warning, and have made the remarkable decision to double the engine speed to Full Speed Ahead and go below to get a good night’s rest. A change of course might be bad for business, we might have to slow down, lose time. Nothing, not even the ultimate risk of the death of nature, can be allowed to hold back the triumphant progress of the ship of rational fools.

Val Plumwood (2002, p1)

Social work doesn’t generally see the connection between person and nature or inquire into it, or develop theory around it, or place it in its computations of what’s important to those the profession serves.

Fred Besthorn (1997, p10)
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Glossary of terms

Environmental justice: action aimed at ensuring fairness and equity for low-income and minority groups who have, to this point in time, been inequitably impacted upon by a range of environmental burdens. More detail on p36.

Nature: used in an inclusive sense in this thesis, recognising that humans and society are part of nature, but also understanding that Western society has a history of separating the two. More detail on p34.

Natural environment: refers to the non-built environment, without necessarily implying that the natural environment is unmodified by human activity.

Social justice: a core value for social workers, based in the notions of equity and fairness for all people. More detail on p35.

Sustainability: the inherent ability of a system (whether social, economic or environmental) to be sustained over time without the need for additional external inputs. More detail about social sustainability on p36.
Certificate of authorship

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

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

Signed ...................................................
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Parts of the literature review have been published:


Ethical approval

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Abstract

This thesis explores the relevance of the natural environment to social work. Although social work has a body of theory for practice known as ecological social work, ‘ecological’ has in effect referred to the socio-cultural environment and has largely ignored the natural world context in which social work practice takes place. A review of the social work literature indicates very little evidence of engagement with the topics of sustainability or environmental issues for social workers, and there is scant attention paid to these issues in accredited social work courses in Australia. Thus the research problem which this thesis addresses is: ‘In what ways, if any, are nature and the broad environmental context of humanity relevant to the profession of social work?’ Through addressing this question, the thesis sheds light on the reasons why the social work profession and social workers in the Western world have by and large ignored natural environment issues and imperatives in social work education and practice.

The main objectives of this thesis are to ascertain the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of the natural environment to social work; to explore factors that enable or constrain social workers’ efforts to enact pro-environmental values and issues in practice; and to suggest possible ways of addressing environmental problems and issues in social work education and practice. The study applied a qualitative research framework, informed by grounded theory and feminist principles.

The study found that while all participants expressed a view that the natural environment was important to them both personally and professionally, it was difficult to enact environmental values in the professional social work role. This difficulty gave rise to professional dilemmas for the majority of participants. The thesis argues that the root cause of such conflicts can be found in the project of modernism and its consequences. Without fully adopting a postmodern stance, many of its elements may be beneficially used to resolve some of the conflicts identified in the study. The thesis has some implications for translating relevant aspects of the social work code of ethics into practice, and for revising educational and training programs for current and future generations of social workers.
Why have the most pressing issues of our time – climate change and ecological crisis – not been met with the same enthusiasm, energy, optimism, ideals and forward-looking democratic spirit as the past tragedies of poverty, tyranny and war?

Ulrich Beck (2010 p254)

Chapter 1: Introduction

Introduction

The focus of this thesis is on the relevance of nature and the environmental context of practice to social workers and their professional practice. This chapter introduces the thesis. It discusses the background to and significance of the research issue, objectives of the study, the author’s motivations and the outline of the thesis.

Background and significance

Awareness of nature as something more than an infinite resource for human exploitation has been in the public consciousness ever since the publication of Rachel Carson’s groundbreaking book, *Silent Spring*, in 1962. Although public interest has waxed and waned in the ensuing period, widespread awareness of the impact of human activity on the environment was raised in 2006/2007 as several events converged and momentum was gained. Release of the Stern Review in Britain (Stern, 2006), Al Gore’s (2006) documentary ‘An Inconvenient Truth’, and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC, 2007) report, confirming human intervention as making an undoubted contribution to global warming, all contributed to a period of unprecedented public awareness and alarm at the perceived environmental crisis.

Concerns about a looming environmental crisis are based in continuing reports of environmental degradation and global warming (IPCC 2007; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006). According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2006a p.5) in its outline of climate change, ‘...it is almost universally accepted that temperatures are rising’. Australia has experienced one of the world’s highest levels of biodiversity decline, and the condition of Australia’s land, inland waters and coastal lakes has seriously declined, and in some places will ‘continue to decline for some time’ (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006a p.13). At the same time, among the many pressures of human activity on the environment, the rate of energy consumption per capita is increasing (Australian Bureau of statistics 2006a).

Among the various voices calling for action, business interests in Australia raised concerns about the need for urgent action to meet environmental challenges, and a consortium that included
large businesses such as Westpac Bank and BP Australia released the Australian Business Roundtable Climate Change report (2006). A common thread with each of these reports is the call for urgent action, as any delay in preventing further global warming is predicted to increase the impact of climate change, and hence the negative environmental impacts and associated economic risks.

Awareness is developing about the ways in which human wellbeing is linked to a healthy environmental context (CSIRO 2007; Low and Glees 1999; McMichael 2003; World Resources Institute 2003, 2005; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004). In the more recent period around 2009 / 2010, some countries have moved to introduce carbon pollution reduction schemes and other measures designed to reduce human-induced impacts on the environment and to deal with global warming (Owen 2007; Sherrard & Tate 2007). A worldwide agreement on emission reduction targets was not reached at the much-vaunted Copenhagen Summit in 2010, hence action could only be taken at the individual country level (Parks and Roberts 2010). The actions of various States have been taken under the duress imposed by a strong campaign questioning the validity of the science that identified human-induced climate change (UNEP 2009). Meanwhile widespread and regular reports appear in the media of climate-related natural disasters, and ever-increasing rates of species extinction, loss of habitat and biodiversity.

While these events have taken place in the public arena, there has not thus far been a substantial debate about environmental issues in the social work literature as we struggle to elicit the implications of the environmental crisis for social work theory and practice. Such a debate would go to the very heart of the way social work as a profession is defined, as well as the boundaries of its professional domain.

Perhaps it is the case that social workers generally agree that their expertise is in matters social, and therefore natural environmental factors are not germane to a debate on social work’s professional interests. I argue that there is a clear connection for social work with matters environmental, particularly in the links between social justice and environmental justice, and that social work’s established expertise can aid ongoing relevance of the profession if a clear focus on social sustainability is incorporated into the social work curriculum and into the continuing professional development program.
Social work is a profession defined as being principally focussed on the social world (AASW 2000). Using a range of methods, social workers seek to empower and to address the needs of people who are vulnerable, or oppressed or living in poverty, based on a unifying motivation of social justice (Healy 2005; O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 1998). The discourse of social work, in the form of literature, textbooks, conference topics and fields of practice, has demonstrated scant attention to the physical environment in which humans are inextricably embedded. For example, the climate change debate that has been the focus of much academic, public policy, and media attention in recent times has not proven so in social work circles. Awareness of this issue appears to be limited to a small number of social workers who have personal interests in environmental issues.

The social work profession at large does not identify environmental issues as relevant to the interests of the profession, or 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, and these two fields are linked in a number of ways. Most notably, it is becoming increasingly obvious that negative environmental consequences are experienced disproportionately by the most vulnerable members of society, the very people with whom social workers most often work (Warren 2000; Plumwood 2002; Coates 2003a; Zapf 2009). Such effects can be observed around the world in phenomena such as: individuals and families who cannot afford to move away from polluted neighbourhoods (Warren 2000); Indigenous peoples who have been driven from their ancestral lands as a result of the cutting and burning of rainforest; placement of heavily polluting industries and waste sites in areas occupied by people on low incomes – most notably people who are poor and non-white; and fishers and Indigenous peoples whose livelihoods have been impacted, if not destroyed, by depletion of fish stocks (Coates 2003a).

Although social workers are ethically committed to promoting social justice and social change, there has been scant attention in social work literature to developing understanding of the ways in which the environmental crisis is relevant to the primarily socio-cultural concerns of social work (Zapf 2009). Notwithstanding the lack of empirical and theoretical literature on this topic, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) added a clause to its code of ethics in 2000 (p.5) outlining the requirement for Australian social workers to ‘manage environmental issues in the interests of human concerns’ as a factor in its value statement on social justice. It remains unclear to this point just what ‘manage environmental issues’ means for social workers, as the AASW has
not published any supporting documentation about the implications for social workers in practice, nor has the AASW offered any other form of training in relation to this change, such as professional development sessions or on-line information. Such a change to the code of ethics presents a dilemma for social workers: they are required by the code of ethics to perform in a way for which they have not been trained, about which there is little discussion in the social work literature, and for which there are no continuing professional education sessions available.

At the heart of this thesis is the notion that the environmental crisis is a social justice issue. For Beck (2010, p.257):

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.

Climate change in the form of global warming is the outstanding threat for human societies in the current environmental crisis (Owen 2007). For the social work profession, which has had a long-standing focus on social justice, the goal will be to recognise the dangers for society of ignoring the ecological crisis; recognise the irrational thinking that has led to the current ecological crisis; recognise the ecological impacts of current social forces such as globalisation and consumerism and work with individuals, groups and communities to counter these forces; and work towards development of a place-sensitive culture.

Historical examples of social collapse related to environmental factors

Noted American social geographer Jared Diamond and eminent Canadian historian Ronald Wright have each examined historical cases of a range of societies (some of which lasted for thousands of years) which have eventually collapsed. Such cases can provide some guidance as we look for clues to help us deal with contemporary issues of social sustainability. Diamond (2005), for example, has examined the historical records of a number of major societies, including the Anasazi people of North America, the Rapanui people of Easter Island, the Roman empire, the Angkor Wat civilization in Cambodia, and Norwegian settlers in Greenland. Diamond found that there are five general predictors of sustainability for any given society. These are: relations with friendly neighbours, relations with unfriendly neighbours, ability to adapt to changing climatic conditions, the environmental damage the society causes, and cultural response.
Based on evidence provided in the historical record, Diamond postulates that when any one of the five factors is a problem for the civilization, even a major one, the civilization can generally cope. However, when the civilization is over-stretched by having to cope with any two of the factors at the same time, Diamond concludes that it is usually just a matter of time before its eventual collapse. Although Diamond’s work has been criticised on the basis of environmental determinism (Gladwell 2005), his evidence that it is not just climatic or other catastrophes that underpin the demise of whole cultures and civilisations is compelling. Diamond presents strong evidence from the historical record that societies can die out, either slowly or spectacularly, because of a lack of response to impending environmental disaster.

Wright (2004) also reviews the history of society on Easter Island, as well as civilizations such as Sumeria and Ur. He found a common pattern among these collapsed civilizations, a pattern that he speculates could possibly have been used in advance to predict their downfall: a tradition of ‘sticking to entrenched beliefs and practices, robbing the future to pay the present, and spending the last reserves of natural capital on a reckless binge of excessive wealth and glory’ (Wright 2004 p.79). While in the present period there is a clear political focus on terrorism, Wright identifies this focus as a diversion from the truly important issues, as ‘terrorism is a small threat compared with hunger, disease, or climate change...[when] 25,000 die every day in the world from contaminated water alone. Each year 20 million children are mentally impaired by malnourishment. Each year, ‘an area greater than Scotland is lost to erosion and urban sprawl, much of it in Asia’ (Wright 2004 p.126).

The factors identified by both Wright and Diamond underscore the need for civilizations to learn from the lessons of the past. Their analysis speaks to the importance of attitudes of adaptability and flexibility, of being willing to examine the interplay of social, economic and environmental issues as they are – not as we might want them to be, and of devising solutions based on the response that is needed – rather than having to do things in the way they’ve always been done. The picture they each present also reinforces the importance for contemporary societies of the interplay between social, economic and environmental systems and the need to view these systems as interdependent rather than as separate structures.

As Gladwell (2005) points out, there are many current examples of societies making decisions that put social and cultural values (such as long-held land use rights) ahead of known environmental risks. Taking Diamond’s and Wright’s analysis of the historical record into account, it seems timely
to question whether multiple societies on Earth are potentially headed towards disintegration because of environmental collapse.

‘The environment’ for humanity’s existence, and potential thriving, has a range of aspects: social, cultural, economic, and natural / physical. The ‘Brundtland Report’ (WCED 1987), as it is known, makes the point that all these aspects are inextricably linked, and that future sustainability relies on humanity’s understanding of these linkages. Action aimed at sustainability, according to the Brundtland Report, cannot succeed unless social / cultural, economic, and environmental systems are all given due recognition.

This thesis accepts that a serious environmental crisis exists, and that the crisis is of such nature and magnitude that humanity cannot rely on developments in science and technology to make discoveries that will allow us to adapt to inescapable environmental changes. There is simply not the time or the resources available in the time needed to adapt to impending global warming, replace depleted resources, deal with toxic wastes, and provide all the food and means for a reasonable standard of living for the billions of people who are currently poor and underemployed (Coates 2003a). Rather than rely on technology, humans must develop a new and more respectful relationship with planet Earth and with each other, using technology and knowledge to ‘maintain a mutually enriching and sustainable human / Earth relationship’ (Coates 2003a p.2).

**The research problem and objectives**

Although the public discussion about environmental change has gained substantial momentum in recent decades, there is little evidence of social work interest in environmental matters, except where ‘the environment’ is defined socio-culturally (Zapf 2009; Coates 2003a, 2003b). The relationship between social work theory and practice and the non-human environment has been left relatively unexplored. This position puts social work at odds with a range of other professional groups, as well as business representative groups, that have recognised the relevance of environmental concerns – even though environmental issues are not the ‘core business’ of such groups.

What does the mounting evidence of environmental decline mean for the domain and boundaries of social work theory and practice? There is a need to explore the lived experience of social workers in regard to this issue. Professional boundaries established rigidly in the past that did not recognise the importance and relevance of the natural environment to human relations can be
questioned. Higgs and Cherry (2009 p.8) argue that ‘Climate change is an example of a universal practice challenge that demands serious study of the very different ways in which people develop understanding, make decisions, communicate, act and, above all, learn to change the way they behave’. That universal practice challenge is equally applicable to the social work profession. For example, although the AASW (2000) code of ethics requires social workers to ‘manage environmental issues in the interests of human concerns’, the questions about what this means for social workers in practice remain almost totally unexplored. Thus the main objectives of this study are:

- to ascertain the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of nature and need for environmental content in social work education and practice;
- to explore factors that enable or constrain social workers’ efforts to enact environmental values and issues in practice; and
- to suggest possible strategies for including relevant natural environmental needs and issues in social work education and practice.

The questions that arise from the objectives of this study are:

- what are the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of the natural environment to their social work practice?
- what are the personal perspectives that inform their views about the natural environment?
- in what ways, if any, does environmental consciousness affect social workers’ practice?
- what are their views about the effects and implications of an environmentally-conscious social work practice?
- what are the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the concept of social sustainability and its relevance to social work?

In order to address the research questions most fully, a qualitative research framework was chosen. The primary method of data collection involved semi-structured interviews with twenty participants from three Australian states and the ACT. The data collection process was informed by elements of a grounded approach to theory building, which affected the entire research process. Grounded theory emphasises an approach to research based on entry into fieldwork with an attitude of informed curiosity rather than at a point where hypotheses have been formulated. This method complements the feminist and qualitative underpinning for the data collection and analysis process because it
accentuates the importance of building theory from the ground up. Secondary data for this study, in the form of Australian social work course outlines and a systematic search of literature in the journals of the national social work associations of Australia, Britain, Canada and the USA for the period 1998-2009, was also collected. The data analysis process involved line-by-line analysis of the transcribed interviews. N-Vivo software was used to manage the data and to compose diagrams and models based on interview material. The secondary data was analysed by identifying relevant themes and content.

In this thesis I examine in detail the various issues raised above, and present a position that expounds the need for social work to develop as a profession that is aware of and active in relation to environmental issues, rather than a profession that ignores the environmental context of practice. I also show, through the results of an empirical study, that social workers in varying fields of practice identify environmental issues as relevant to practice and see the need for the representative professional association in Australia to take the lead on this issue in a way that aids in the recognition of environmental justice practice as legitimate social work practice. Such legitimation by the professional association is necessary in a work environment that is dominated by managerialism and economic rationalism, thus making it extremely difficult for social workers to extend their counselling, casework, policy, community work, or research interests into environmental realms, even though environmental concerns may be highly relevant in particular instances.

**Personal background**

My own interest in the question of legitimacy of environmental issues as part of social work practice has a history that began around 1995, when I had free rein to decide on a topic for my Master of Social Work dissertation. At that stage I was already a qualified permaculture designer, and involved in the Riverina permaculture group. Permaculture is based on a design process that emphasises self-sufficiency through using all the elements available to produce the most useful and energy-efficient environment possible – ‘useful’ being defined as plant or other element that serves a food, health, energy-efficiency or micro-climate purpose in the designed environment. It seemed to me then that knowledge about permaculture might have application for social workers involved in community work in isolated communities, as permaculture offers systematic methods that might be acceptable to a community wanting to develop their self-sufficiency and independence. At the same time, my interest in feminist theories and methodologies led me to believe that my research interests should reflect my belief that the personal is political, and that I should not hold a position of ‘power over’ the people who agreed to be participants in my research project.
Similarly, when it came time to decide upon a PhD research topic and the appropriate methodology, I was keen to implement the same principles. ‘The personal is political’ stance, a long-time anthem of the feminist movement, calls for congruence between one’s own personal beliefs and practices and one’s public behaviour and interests (Dominelli 2002). The ‘personal is political’ phrase indicates that the choices each person makes about their own interests is actually a public statement about what ‘matters’. I interpreted this for me to mean that my topic should have personal relevance for me, and that it was also an opportunity for me to make a public statement about what matters. One of my concerns about my chosen profession is that, as a female-dominated occupation, there are gender implications involved in decisions made about the focus of the profession – commonly regarded as one of the ‘caring’ professions. The choice of a PhD topic and methodology meant for me that it was time to combine my personal sense of urgency about the need to implement large-scale social change that could contribute to preventing the planet from reaching a disastrous and irreversible tipping-point, with my concern that social work is fast becoming irrelevant because of the constrictions faced by a gendered profession that seems to me to be having difficulty adapting to the postmodern era.

In order to be relevant, I believe that social work needs to expand its professional horizons such that the ever-changing context of practice forms a cogent backdrop to the theory and practices that underpin social work. At this particular point in history, there is no more urgent contextual issue than the demonstrated changes to the Earth’s climate and eco-systems that could mean life itself is under threat in the foreseeable future. Rather than standing firm on a pedestal of surety, convinced that environmental matters are outside its professional purview, social work needs to be part of the solution – a solution based on valuing all the Earth’s ecosystems as well as the people within them, and identifying the relevant issues of environmental justice upon which we need to act.

**Thesis structure**

The thesis is organised into nine chapters. This first chapter introduces the thesis. The next chapter examines relevant literature in more detail: the focus of social work discourses, relevant environmental issues, sustainability, and social theory. Chapter 3 focuses on the details of Bauman’s social theory and Plumwood’s philosophy, outlining the relevance of the arguments of these two theorists to the thesis. In chapter 4, the qualitative methodology for the study is outlined and justified. Chapter 5 describes the demographic and other characteristics of the participants in this study, and presents the findings from interviews in regard to participants’ views on the environment.
and sustainability. Participant responses are presented under the broad heading of ‘the connectedness and the brokenness’ – a phrase used to capture the dissonance described by most participants. Chapter 6 describes and analyses participants’ views about the ways in which their environmental understandings and interests impact on their professional roles. Issues of professional identity, and personal / professional divides are examined. Participant responses are presented under the broad heading ‘this separation of public and private’ to represent the demarcation described by most participants. Chapter 7 presents the findings from participant interviews in regard to understandings about bringing the personal and the professional together. This chapter is presented under the broad heading ‘understanding about the wholeness’, as participants described their striving for congruence and wholism. Chapter 8, under the broad heading ‘how can we not be involved?’ presents participants’ views about the future for social work, addressing social work education, concern for future generations, and the professional project overall. Chapter 9 provides a summary of the thesis findings and arguments, and the conclusions that can be drawn.
Chapter 2: Literature review: Social work and the environment

Introduction

The ways in which the natural environment has been perceived and conceptualised in the social work literature are the major focus of this chapter. The chapter also looks at responses from other disciplines in regard to environmental imperatives. In the concluding remarks, the research gaps and focus are briefly stated.

Worldwide there is increased concern with the welfare of the environment (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001; United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) 2009; Beck 2010). Humankind now appears to be entering a complex period wherein we are faced with the degradation and potential destruction of our sustaining natural world (Coates 2003a; UNEP 2009). Humans may collectively be facing a fundamental shift in values as we examine our approaches toward living on and with this planet (Plumwood 2002; Zapf 2009). Ongoing summits and reviews of policy indicate that governments are beginning to respond to environmental imperatives (Garnaut 2008; Stern 2006). Meadowcroft (2007) hypothesises that society could currently be in the early stages of constructing an environmental state in much the same way as a welfare state was created in the last century. Yet the social work literature does not indicate any sustained interest by the broad social work discipline in the debates about the impacts of environmental decline and climate change upon society (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001; Coates 2003a; Zapf 2009).

At this time of change and flux, it is pertinent to question the relevance of social work as humankind faces such serious challenges. It is also a time to question whether the person-in-environment concept that has underpinned the social work discourse in recent decades will equip social workers to be at the forefront in planning for the social changes that are upon us.

Social work and the environment

Background

Social workers have engaged with the concept of ‘the environment’ for many years, yet within the social work literature ‘the environment’ refers almost exclusively to the socio-cultural or psychosocial environment (Coates 2003a; McKinnon 2001; 2005; 2008; Zapf 2009). Potential links
between the natural environment, as characterised by ecological systems, and social work theory and practice have been left relatively unexplored in the social work literature. For example, although there has been extensive use of Bronfenbrenner’s (1979, 2005) ecological systems theory in social work, as well as eco-maps to plot the interactions between various social actors and systems, the focus of such theories and methods of analysis has been on the interplay of family, economic, cultural, and political structures – not on the interplay between humans and the rest of the natural world.

Likewise, the person-in-environment concept has been an important element in social work practice theory for many years, and the ‘ecological approach’ has gained favour as a practice model more recently, though each can be seen to have a substantially psycho-social focus (Healy 2005). Payne (2005, p.91) for example, describes the person in environment (or situation) approach as ‘focusing on current situations and relationships and seeking better understanding of others, insight into reasons for the clients’ and others’ behaviour; evaluation of feelings associated with the situation and behaviour’. Such frameworks are not predicated upon social workers’ understanding of the links between non-human and human environments, and their roots in Mary Richmond’s ‘human-in-environment’ concept are obvious (Narhi 2004). Richmond (1922) was a pioneer in the development of social work practice as a professional activity, and Zapf (2009) identifies Richmond’s foundational practice framework as highly influential in social work. However Zapf (2009 p.28) also notes that Richmond ‘made a distinction between the social and physical environments as influences on human behaviour. Yet she concluded that the physical environment ‘becomes part of the social environment’ to the extent that it ‘frequently has its social aspects’.

Perhaps it is the case that social workers generally agree that their expertise is in matters social, and therefore physical/natural environmental factors are not germane to a debate on social work’s professional interests. However, such a position ignores existing and potential connections between social justice and environmental justice, and fails to understand the possibilities for the expertise of social workers to be utilised in social/environmental nexus situations.

The social work project undoubtedly has honourable aims, with the majority of its activities aimed at promoting social change, problem solving in human relationships, and empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being (IFSW, 2000). However, the commonly acknowledged boundaries of social work’s expertise and activities that have been accepted in the literature and
in the professional vernacular have the potential to derail the relevance of social work in an age of environmental crisis.

Social work literature

Mary Richmond acknowledged the physical environment as an important contextual consideration for practice when she was laying the conceptual foundations for the new profession of social work. However, Richmond (1922 p.99) perceived the importance of the physical environment to be related to its social aspects, asserting that the physical environment ‘becomes part of the social environment’ insofar as it ‘frequently has its social aspects’. Zapf (2009) claims that, from the outset, the social work profession has been more comfortable using social science lenses to view the environment rather than perspectives from the physical or natural sciences.

Richmond’s casework model of practice dominated Western social work practice throughout the first half of the twentieth century (Healy 2005). This dominance coincided with the two World Wars, and the significant impact upon clinical models for various allied health professions of returning war veterans who were experiencing post-traumatic stresses (Zastrow 1999).

Yet at a later point, social work did adopt an ecological perspective taken from the natural sciences (Suppes and Wells 2009). The ecological model of social work practice may also be interpreted as a distortion of a model from the natural sciences used to re-affirm the profession’s emphasis on the social environment (Zapf 2009). For instance, the ecosystems perspective provided social work with an outlook closely related to biological science, and encouraged a ‘simultaneous focus on person and environment’ (Suppes and Wells 2009 p58). However this model, derived as it was from the basic assumptions of systems theory, was also based on assumptions that the person would be interpreted from psychological theory, and the environment could be interpreted by sociological and economic theory (Zapf 2009). Thus, while ‘the environment’ is acknowledged in social work literature since the early days of the profession, it is conceived in socio-cultural terms. The environment is rarely conceived in the social work literature as being about the physical / natural environment. This is an important gap in social work literature because it precludes consideration of the relevance of environmental justice issues that have social justice implications. An example of such an issue would be in cases of pollution affecting people living in poverty, where issues of coping, resilience and advocacy for change need to be considered.
The ecological perspective was developed into a functional systems approach for social work by Pincus and Minahan (1973) who proposed four basic systems for practice, all of which were social. The change agent system, client system, target system and action system were the focus of practice, and from this systems perspective social work practice was conceived as being about ‘the interactions between people and systems in the social environment’ (Pincus and Minahan 1973, p.3). The goal of practice in Pincus and Minahan’s conception was for the reinstatement of balance or equilibrium within contiguous social systems that had experienced some disruption (Zapf 2009). Considerations of nature and the physical environment were noticeably beyond the scope of this approach. According to Zapf (2009), the ecosystems model laid the foundations for a pattern that became firmly established in the social work literature, at least until the 1990’s, whereby the physical environment was ignored, and the environment was transformed into the social environment. The mechanism, however intentional or unintentional, for fading the physical environment into the background occurred when the physical environment was left out of model descriptions and diagrams (Zapf 2009). That is, although the physical environment was often mentioned as relevant, it became inconsequential in practice models.

There is historical evidence, though, that there were some practising social workers who viewed the environment as intrinsically important and incorporated nature into their work. For example, around the same time that Richmond formalised the casework model of social work in the 1920’s, Jane Addams ‘...never separated the human need for beauty, art and nature from the need for social reform’ (Bartlett 2003 p.116). Addams was a health advocate, social reformer, and one time garbage collector, who understood the relationship between sanitation and health. She also established the first parks and recreation centres in the city of Chicago (Bartlett 2003). Addams advocated and worked for the creation of public green spaces primarily for workers and their families to find respite from the restrictions of the factories and the harsh working conditions of the slaughterhouses.

The period of the Second World War through to the 1960’s saw an increased focus on the casework approach to social work practice, with its concomitant emphasis on social psychology, and a move away from macro-level approaches to practice (Bartlett 2003; Healy 2005). While there were calls by Hollis in the 1960’s (as cited in Healy 2005) for a dual focus on person and environment, this dual focus was primarily conceived as a psychosocial perspective that
recognised social and psychological aspects exclusively in their consideration of what they called ‘the environment’.

Systems theory was a major influence on social work in the 1970’s. Narhi (2004) ascribes particular impacts on social work in the United Kingdom through interpretations of systems theory by Goldstein (1973) and Pincus and Minahan (1973) in this period. Later development of ecological systems theory by Siporin (1975) and Germain and Gitterman (1980) are seen as having their major impact in North America (Narhi 2004). Theory development by Barber (1991) and Meyer (1983) also contributed to the impact of systems theories on ecological social work (Narhi 2004). The general systems theory view draws a parallel between the way society operates and the way biological systems operate. Interdependence or interaction between the different parts of systems provides the foundational insight of general systems theory. Viewing people as systems ensures that they are not thought of as isolated individuals, but as elements within a social system that both includes and excludes them (Barber 1991).

Introduction of the systems approach in social work was lauded at the time because it was understood as not just a conceptual framework, but also as a symbol of unification that was expected to promote the power and influence of the social work profession (Payne 2002; Healy 2005). However, while systems theory provided an intellectual foundation for reintegrating psychological and sociological discourses by recognising systems that included interpersonal and intrapersonal, neighbourhood and society (Healy 2005), nature and the physical environment was largely ignored (Zapf 2009).

The ecosystems perspective of the 1970’s is characterised by Healy (2005) as superceding general systems theory in its influence on social work. Germain and Gitterman (1980) and Meyer (1983) are credited with leading the formulation of the ecosystems perspective in social work (Healy 2005). However, these formulations use ‘ecology’ as merely a metaphor for connections within and across systems rather than as a way of incorporating broader environmental concerns into social work consideration (Zapf 2009). The ecological model stresses that the ‘person and environment are engaged in constant circular exchanges in which each is reciprocally shaping and influencing the other over time’ (Germain and Gitterman 1980, p34).

More recent evidence of social work engagement with nature and the physical environmental issues began to emerge in the early 1990’s, with articles by Gutheil (1992), concerned with social
workers’ neglect of physical surroundings when conducting assessments, and by Hoff and Polack (1993), who considered human / environment interaction from a completely different perspective. Hoff and Polack looked more closely at how the environment influences human activity and they emphasised the importance of understanding human threats to environmental viability, which they considered had been ignored in the social work literature up to this point.

Berger and Kelly, published later in 1993, called for the ecological model of social work practice to incorporate ‘a full awareness of human’s role in biological as well as social ecosystems’ (p524). A 12-point Ecological Credo for Social Workers was developed by Berger and Kelly (1993), providing an expanded version of the foundational values they considered would be needed to support this new direction in social work. Among other things, Berger and Kelly’s Credo calls for social work concern for the full range of interconnectedness among all systems within the Earth’s biosphere; the promotion of self-determination and respect for individuals within the context of individual and community respect for nature; the belief in global equality; and the promotion of social, political and economic systems that respect the integrity of the biosphere.

Berger (1995) later published an editorial entitled ‘Habitat Destruction Syndrome’, in which he described a global sickness involving humans collectively engaging in environmentally destructive practices that will ‘ensure our eventual self-destruction’ (p441). Berger (1995) argued that humankind has become desensitised to the threats to the environment and are at the same time immobilised by fear that the problem is too big for us to deal with. Berger’s (1995, p443) challenge to the social work profession at that time was the question of why we do not ‘add environmental activism to the list of social welfare concerns’, given his argument that habitat destruction needs to be understood as the greatest threat to human social welfare.

The premise that human and environmental welfare are inextricably linked also underpinned Hoff and McNutt’s (1994) book, The global environmental Crisis: Implications for social work and social welfare. This language 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 as ‘inextricable’ the links between social, economic and environmental systems. Motivated by the environmental threats facing humankind, Hoff and McNutt argued that social work and other professions need to move beyond outdated goals about individual wellbeing and social welfare to adopt new practice models aimed at sustainability and
protection of the environment. The National Association of Social Workers (USA) (2000 p.105) in later years devised a policy statement giving recognition to human / environmental interaction:

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.

Australian social workers have demonstrated some interest in environmental issues. In 2001, a survey of members of the AASW found that some 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). However, the recognition of environmental issues shown by the AASW not only failed to generate substantial debate in the Australian Social Work journal, nothing has been published by the AASW about how environmental management in the interests of human welfare might be brought into practice by social workers.

Besthorn (2000) suggests that knowledge of an individuals’ environment encompasses much more than social work’s traditional social definition, and both Besthorn (2000) and Ungar (2002) explore connections between social work and concerns of the deep ecology movement, each suggesting that ecological theory is relevant to social work. The conceptual difficulty that besets a socially defined understanding of the environment is described by Besthorn (2000 p1) as being most profoundly obvious in ‘social work’s narrow regard for integrating a comprehensive understanding of the natural environment and its influence on human self-awareness and behavior (sic), issues of social and economic justice and quality of both psychological and spiritual wellbeing’.

In 2001, Marlow and Van Rooyen (p253) published the results of an exploratory study that gathered information about social workers in the USA and South Africa in regard to concern with 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’.
A few years later, Rogge and Combs-Orme (2003) went on to examine social work practice issues in regard to the effects of chemical exposure on children. They articulated very explicit links between environmental and social justice issues, and were particularly concerned that there was a:

> disproportionate burden on children of color, who more often live in communities characterized by low income, urban congestion, inadequate housing, poor home ventilation systems, poor air quality, and overcrowding. (Rogge and Combs-Orme 2003 p440)

Scandinavian and German social work academics have been raising questions about the relevance of environmental matters to social work for quite some time, however little of their concern has been recognised in the English-language journals. Narhi’s 2004 doctoral dissertation outlined the historical development of the eco-social approach in social work, which she defined as a social work practice approach that has an emphasis upon ‘the reciprocal relationship between the living environment and human welfare from the point of view of eco-socially sustainable development’ (Narhi 2004, p.14). Narhi acknowledges that her work is substantially based upon understandings of eco-social practice developed by Finnish social work academic Aila-Leena Matthies during the 1990’s, and she makes the point that social workers have the potential to become one of the expert voices in defining eco-social sustainability. Narhi makes this claim on the basis that social workers have a unique knowledge base that includes multiple ways of knowing in and from practice, as well as a firm foundation through their action as mediators in local contexts (Narhi 2004). Narhi concludes that the basic question of professional social work interest in the relationship between the living environment and human welfare has not changed as such, but rather society as a whole, living environments, and the way that people perceive and construct nature has changed over time.

Despite the examples provided in this chapter, overall the number of publications about the environment in the social work literature has been extremely limited, particularly journal articles in North American, Australian and British social work journals. Non-western social work academics and practitioners have exhibited a more long-standing awareness of the environmental / social nexus, and the development of practice in countries such as India, Chile and Uganda have long reflected a view of social work practice as a more environmentally-embedded endeavour (Hokenstad, Khinduka and Midgely 1992). Although it is outside the scope of this thesis, social development literature offers further insights into the integration of social and ecological issues (see, for example, Pawar and Cox 2010).
The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), through its International Policy Statement on Globalisation and the Environment (IFSW, undated) recognises that both natural and built environments have a direct impact on people’s potential to develop and to achieve their potential, and that the earth’s resources should be shared in a sustainable way. The policy also supports vigorous enforcement of existing environmental protection laws and standards, and urges social workers to work towards a healthier environment and to ensure that environmental issues gain an increased presence in social work education. However the sentiments implicit in this policy statement are still not greatly evident in the social work literature in the form of practice models, though a few recent international social work and community development texts have attempted to include it (See, for example, Cox and Pawar 2006; Healy 2001; Stoesz, Guzzetta and Lusk 1999; Ife and Tesoriero 2006).

Since the middle of the 20th century the concepts of sustainability and ecology have emerged as key concepts in the environmental movement (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001; Ungar 2002). Both ecology and sustainability are based on the systems perspective which, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is not an unfamiliar concept in social work. More and more, social workers are being urged to consider environmental issues in their practice (Besthorn 2000; Coates 2003a; McKinnon 2001; McKinnon 2005; Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001; Ungar 2002; Zapf 2009). In particular, social workers are being asked to: engage in practice that recognises the links between social justice and environmental justice (McKinnon 2001; 2005); move away from a remedial action approach and become more involved in sustainable development in economically developing nations (Hall 1996); and emphasise the role of sustainability not only as central to social work but for the development of world peace and global stability (Sanders 1994).

Social work interest in environmental issues has been dismissed by some observers as ‘middle class concerns’ (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001 p.243); however increasing evidence of environmental degradation demonstrates that environmental imperatives relate to the central essence of social work, particularly its social justice concerns. It is through understanding of, and action related to, environmental issues that social workers can facilitate relationships that are of maximum mutual and beneficial reward for clients and the environment within which they exist (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001). Hokenstad, Khinduka and Midgely (1992) predicted almost twenty years ago that social work interest in the environment would become a major interest in the field of international social work as environmental problems that were formerly regarded as
mainly being of interest to the middle class become a major concern for social workers throughout the world due to recognition of inequitable environmental impacts. This prediction has not yet translated into observable changes in the international social work literature, and environmental issues remain marginalised.

Social work proponents of a more ecologically-aware form of social work practice also have to deal with the climate-change sceptics’ critique of the widespread acceptance of the concept of global warming as an anthropogenically-caused phenomenon (Narhi 2004). If there was any doubt that human-induced climate change is a reality, it was dispelled by the last major report of the IPCC, which addressed climate change issues in the period to 2007. The majority scientific findings of this report found the evidence that global warming is largely due to the impact of human activity is now unequivocal (IPCC, 2007). The IPCC has also published a number of updates since the 2007 report as new data becomes available, and if anything the updates have served to confirm the 2007 findings and point to an even more dire situation than was first envisaged (IPCC 2001, 2007). Yet the causes of current environmental problems should not necessarily be an issue of major concern for social work. Zapf’s (2009 p190) concepts of ‘living well in place’ encapsulate what ought to be a more central concern for social work: the goal of understanding the world as being in a continual process of co-creation involving people and the balance of the natural world.

Despite increasing calls for the development of social work theory and practice that responds to environmental issues, changes to social work codes of ethics that require social workers to be environmentally aware and to practice accordingly, and evidence of the links between poverty, gender and environmental injustice, there have been very few empirical studies that examine the relationship between environmental issues and social work. Narhi reports in her 2004 thesis on her study that involved 25 social workers, 20 of whom were community based. Her research was concerned with the way that community based social workers constructed eco-social work through their action and knowledge production during an action research process in the Jyvaskyla region of Finland in the period 1995-2000. Narhi describes her study as being located at the intersection of two ongoing discussions in the social sciences and in social work. The first relates to the issue of expertise in late modern society as impacted by discussions about the nature of knowledge and different ways of knowing in social work. The second aspect of Narhí's study related to environmental issues arising in both social sciences in general and social work in particular.
Narhi (p.76) concluded that the social workers in her study seemed to be working at once towards a ‘modern technical professional project’ and on the other hand towards a ‘late modern type of reflexive and emancipatory project’. The way the social workers in this study negotiated eco-social practice was by negotiating the tensions involved in both ‘open and negotiated expertise’, and trying to ‘make a distinction between service users’ and residents’ points of view in order to be taken seriously, as experts who have a right to speak’ (Narhi 2004 p.76). The concepts of ‘boundary negotiated knowledge’ and ‘boundary negotiated expertise’ were used by Narhi (2004 p.76) to illustrate the ways in which the social workers in her study were aiming to become both ‘an identified expert’ and ‘a reflective listener’ at the round table where eco-socially sustainable and inclusive living environments were defined.

Narhi’s findings underscore discussions in the literature about the relevance of social work skills and knowledge for a leadership role in dealing with environmental concerns (Coates 2003; Zapf 2009). Based on the data collected for her research, Narhi (2004 p.77) found that social workers do have the potential to become one of the expert groups in defining eco-social work sustainability because they have a unique knowledge base for such a role: ‘multiple ways of knowing in and from practice, and a firm foundation through their action as mediators in local contexts’.

The tentativeness with which the social worker participants in Narhi’s study approached the issue of expertise on matters of environment and sustainability was also evident in an earlier study by Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001). This study examined the views of randomly selected social workers from New Mexico, USA and KwaZulu Natal in South Africa. While a large majority (92.8%) of the respondents claimed that environmental issues were important to them personally, and a majority (71.1%) reported that environmental issues were important to the social work practice profession, only 45.9% reported that they did actually incorporate environmental issues in their practice. Participants in this study reported that lack of education or training in environmental issues was a major barrier to the incorporation of environmental issues in their practice. Marlow and Van Rooyen found significant differences in the efforts of participants to include environmental issues according to predominant practice approach. Social worker participants from New Mexico focussed primarily on efforts directed at individuals, while those from KwaZulu Natal were more involved in community-based services and organisations.
Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001 p.252) made recommendations in regard to five aspects of theory and skills development for social workers. Firstly, in regard to community focus, they found that social workers have a role in empowering communities to advocate for environmental responsibility. Secondly, in regard to developing interventions: they found a need for creative strategies and interventions for a variety of different client systems in a range of political, social and economic contexts. Thirdly, they looked at partnerships with public health and found a need to develop partnerships that will result in a more holistic approach to dealing with the challenges of the environmental crisis. Fourthly, in regard to theories for practice: they recommend that the theories guiding practice need to be revisited with a view to developing theories that are inclusive of the environment at the broadest level. Specifically, they view development of such theories for practice as necessary to ‘facilitate social workers viewing the environment as a more far-reaching issue with implications for mental, physical, economic and social wellbeing’ (p.252). Finally, Marlow and Van Rooyen call for environmental education for social workers and research that establishes the nature and extent of environmental education in schools of social work. Their recommendations speak to the issue of expertise, and reinforce Narhi’s (2004, p.75) finding in regard to the Finnish situation when she noted that ‘Social workers do not necessarily feel they have the right to speak on the strength of the kind of knowledge they possess’.

Environmental issues in social work journals

The published journals of the professional social work associations represent the site of informed debate on matters deemed central to the profession and its domain of practice. The Australian, British, Canadian and USA national social work journals were examined for the period 2000-2009 inclusive to seek mention of any form of words to do with environment / ecology / sustainability (such as enviro, eco, or sustainable). For the purposes of this study, the British, Canadian and USA journals were chosen because of their similarity to the scope of the Australian Association of Social Workers’ journal. This search was conducted through the database link available on each journal’s website. The links allowed a search of the relevant publisher’s journal database, which was limited to a search of the journal in question (that is, the search did not include any other journals from the same publisher).

The journals examined were:

Australian Social Work
Canadian Social Work
The search revealed a very limited number of articles that met the search criteria. The four selected national social work association journals were searched for articles with any variation of the following terms in the title or abstract: sustainable / sustainability; environment / environmental; eco-; and nature. The findings are outlined for each journal as follows.

*Canadian Social Work (CSW)* is the journal of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) and is published once annually. A full search for all variations of the search terms revealed no (0) results for any of those terms for the period 1999-2010. *The British Journal of Social Work* is the journal of the British Association of Social Workers and is published eight times each year. The search of terms was conducted for the period January 1999 to July 2010, and revealed no (0) results for all terms with two exceptions. There were seven articles with the term ‘environment’ in the title / abstract. The seven articles were examined in detail, and the term ‘environment’ invariably used in reference to the social environment. These articles had titles such as ‘Human behaviour and the social environment’ (Gregor 2008). The term ‘nature’ also appeared in four of the journal’s articles in the chosen period. Close examination of the four articles revealed that ‘nature’ referred to the nature and context of social work practice in general, and none were related to any aspect of the natural environment.

*Social Work*, the journal of the [USA] National Association of Social Workers is published four times per year. The term search was conducted for the period 2000-2010, as the archive database has a limited history available for the period 2000-onwards only. The search uncovered no (0) results for all terms except ‘environment’ and ‘nature’. The term ‘environment’ appeared in two articles. Close examination showed that both these articles were in regard to the social issues, one being the health care environment and the other about working with people in economic poverty. The term ‘nature’ appeared in one article. This article was in regard to the nature of social work generally and the future of the profession (Reisch and Gorin 2001).

*Australian Social Work* is the journal of the AASW and is published four times per year. The term search was conducted for the period January 1999 to July 2010. The search revealed no (0) results for all search terms with the exception of ‘environment’. There were two articles containing this term – one by McKinnon (2008) in regard to sustainability and the relevance of the natural
environment to social work practice, and another that was focussed on the workplace environment.

This information is summarised in Table 1, following.

Table 1: Review of national social work journals

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Journal</th>
<th>Results</th>
<th>Comment</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Canadian Social Work</strong></td>
<td>No results for any of the search terms</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>British Journal of Social Work</strong></td>
<td>Environment – 7 articles</td>
<td>All 7 articles focussed on the social environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature – 4 articles</td>
<td>All 4 articles focussed on the general nature and context of practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No results for sustainability/</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sustainable/eco.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Social Work</strong></td>
<td>Environment – 2 articles</td>
<td>Both articles focussed on the social environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Nature – 1 article</td>
<td>Focussed on the general nature of social work and its future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No results for sustainability/</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sustainable/eco.</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Australian Social Work</strong></td>
<td>Environment – 2 articles</td>
<td>1 article by McKinnon on sustainability and the natural environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No results for sustainability/</td>
<td>1 article about the workplace environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>sustainable/eco/nature.</td>
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This review of the content of journals of the national social work associations of Canada, Britain, the USA, and Australia shows a high level of concordance with the trends identified in the literature review. The ‘disappearing’ (Zapf 2009 p.46) of the physical environment from the social work discourse is almost total. This database search confirms the previous review conducted in regard to the same topic for the period 1989 – 1998, though not including the Canadian journal (McKinnon 2001). At that time, McKinnon found only seven search-relevant articles. These articles were focussed on drawing the attention of the social work profession to a range of environmental issues thought to be relevant to social work practice.

Other disciplines and the environment

In exploring the social work response to environmental imperatives, it is useful to also examine the approach that similarly placed disciplines have taken. Such an examination can reveal issues and approaches relevant to social work, and can potentially suggest ways forward for the social work profession.

Sociologist Hugh Stretton (1976) began raising concerns relatively early in Australia when he reported on the inequitable distributional effects of environmental change and related policies in his book *Capitalism, socialism and the environment*. Stretton was an early advocate for recognition of the rising costs of living associated with, for example, petrol price increases linked with society’s dependency on cars. Further, Stretton underlined the increased options associated with wealth and the concomitant lack of choice experienced by the poor about how and where they live.

The field of sociology has been grappling with the ‘nature / society’ theoretical divide since 1980 at least, when Dunlap and Catton (cited in Goldman and Schurman 2000, p.563) called for a paradigmatic shift in sociology – a shift toward recognition of the inextricability of nature and society, and away from the ‘human exemptionalism paradigm’ based on anthropocentrism. Part of the problem for sociology in developing this new paradigm has been that early sociologists were focussed on establishing a separate science of society. Nature was therefore not a major concern in classical sociological theory (Tovey 2003).

A second aspect of the nature / society divide in sociology has been, according to Goldman and Schurman (2000), the powerful influence that Enlightenment thought has had on the production and structure of sociological knowledge. Notwithstanding the rising tide of the sub-discipline of
environmental sociology, most of the sociology literature ‘treats nature as a discrete and external object, one that can be known through the application of an objective, dispassionate science’ (Goldman and Schurman 2000, p.564). The Enlightenment ontology of ‘nature as primordial, mechanistic and autonomous’ has proved to be highly problematic as more recent critiques have advanced the idea of nature as not only socially constructed, but that the ‘natural’ is deeply embedded in all social forms (Goldman and Schurman 2000, p.564). Much of the trend in environmental sociology as it stands is for the dissolution of nature / society dualisms, understanding nature to be an actor with a ‘conjoined materiality with society’ (Goldman and Schurman 2000, p.564).

Sociological analyses of the environment and of society’s relationship with nature, which previously avoided accounts of the ‘natural’, have, in recent times, become less ‘nature-phobic’ (Cudworth 2003 p.32). In many ways, this sociological position is very similar to the way in which social work theory development has reflected a legacy of being interested in only ‘the social’, while ‘nature’ has been seen as being outside the scope of the discipline. Cudworth (2003) identifies social constructionism, critical realism and co-constructionism as three important perspectives in contemporary sociological analyses of the environment. Critical realist positions see the environment as a highly complex and varied series of objects with their own distinct properties and causal powers, whereby environmental problems are seen as being a result of human exploitation and abuse, and where environmental issues can often be interrelated with social issues. In this perspective, nature is seen as being mediated through society, whereby social organisation has an impact on natural processes. Social constructionists, on the other hand, view the environment as a set of objects around which there are a wide range of differing narratives that shift across time, space and place. From the perspective of social constructionism, the relationship between environment and society is mediated by a view of nature as social, whereby categories of society and nature are constantly reconstituted through one another. Co-constructionism, though, interprets the environment as a series of dynamic and changing objects with which humans interact - that is, the social and the natural are constructed in relation to one another. From this co-constructed perspective, nature cannot be separated out from the social, and this view has gained increasing traction in the sociology literature in recent years (Uggla 2010; Beck 2010).

Like sociology, the field of education has also been grappling with ideas about nature, and in this case, its pedagogical relevance. There has been debate about, and rejection of, modes of critical
inquiry derived from Enlightenment thinkers. Bowers (2003b) argues that the basis of education in Enlightenment thinking is responsible for a pattern of thinking that casts the environment as an economic resource or as a completely irrelevant issue when thinking about educational reform. He further argues that anthropocentrism is clearly evident in educational literature, and is especially noticeable in the writings of some noted educational reformers, such as Freire (Bowers 2003b). Education is grappling with a move to understand the connections between biological diversity and cultural diversity:

*The Western roots of anthropocentric thinking, which is where we acquired the bias that continues to represent print-based cultures as more advanced than oral cultures, which is why public schools and universities continue to represent progress as a matter of overturning or moving beyond the constraint of traditions, and which is the source of the idea that the Western cultures are more educationally advanced.* (Bowers 2003b p.157).

Eco-justice education is a reformist move within education aimed at developing awareness through education of ways to reduce human impact on natural systems to ensure their ongoing viability (Bowers 2003b). This move recognises the need for education to move beyond the conventional school paradigm to engage the broader society in a transformation to ecological literacy involving ‘the active cultivation of ecological intelligence, imagination and competence’ (Orr 1994, in Zapf 2009 p.154).

Psychology is another professional discipline that has struggled with issues around the relevance of the environment, and like social work, the Western separation of person and environment also resides at the centre of psychology (Coates 2003a). Unlike social work though, psychology has developed a declared specialisation of environmental psychology, and has a journal dedicated to this specialty – the *Journal of Environmental Psychology* with the following purpose:

*The Journal of Environmental Psychology serves individuals in a wide range of disciplines who have an interest in the scientific study of the transactions and interrelationships between people and their physical surroundings (including built and natural environments, the use and abuse of nature and natural resources, and sustainability-related behavior.* (Journal of Environmental Psychology 2010).

The creation and labelling of environmental psychology as a specialty could be viewed as effectively relegating the environment to the margins of psychology, in a similar process to the marginalisation of rural or Aboriginal fields of social work (Zapf 2009). However, the development of the field of environmental psychology has been accompanied by an emphasis on multi-
disciplinary approaches and a focus on creating a knowledge base, which has a potentially significant impact on the mainstream of psychology and on other disciplines. In fact, it perhaps represents a model for the development of a social work knowledge base along similar lines.

The Australian Psychological Society (2010) has developed a position statement on Psychology and Climate Change. The statement emphasises the urgency of climate change as a global problem ‘with significant psychosocial and health implications’ (Australian Psychological Society 2010, section 2.1). As part of this recognition of urgency, the position statement aims ‘to advocate for government, businesses, and organisations to develop effective strategies to minimise climate change impacts, and to position psychologists as a professional group with expert knowledge, skills and resources that can help in climate change science, including mitigation and adaptation’ (Australian Psychological Society 2010, section 2.1). The position statement further identifies the unique contribution that psychologists can make to the debate and to action through: collaborative, multi-disciplinary work on environmental issues, recognition of human motivators and behaviours as constituting key causal factors in regard to environmental problems; providing answers about how people and organisations can change their behaviour to reduce the threat of climate change; and helping individuals and communities adapt to the psychosocial impacts of climate change (Australian Psychological Society 2010, section 5).

Like social work, the fields of sociology, education, and psychology have grappled with understanding the relevance of nature, the environment, and the impacts of environmental degradation on people. Having accepted the relevance, each of these disciplines has moved on to a more specific development of relevant theory (particularly in the case of sociology) and practice (particularly in relation to education and psychology). Sociology, education, and psychology are no longer debating the relevance of nature and humanity’s environmental context to their field – they have moved on to understanding aetiology, ontology, and their role as advocates on environmental issues such as climate change.

**Research gaps and concluding remarks**

Although the amount of literature relating to social work and the environment is relatively small, the authors involved consistently emphasise the relevance of nature and the environment context to social work. They argue this on the basis of the links between social injustice and environmental degradation. There is a call for greater social work research and interrogation about social work practice as it relates to the environment, and especially to nature.
None of the social work studies examined in this literature review focus on the Australian context. Nor do they address questions about how social workers might contribute to social sustainability. This thesis will fill a particular gap in social work education and literature by ascertaining the views of self-identified environmentally-conscious social workers in Australia about the relevance of and need for social and environmental sustainability content in social work education and practice.

This study will help to answer questions, not addressed to this point in the literature, about the personal perspectives that inform social workers’ views concerning the physical environment and in what ways, if any, does environmental consciousness affect social workers practice? It will also help to answer questions about what views social workers hold about the effects and implications of an environmentally-conscious social work practice.

The next chapter continues the review of literature, but focuses on the theoretical and professional context that informs this study.
Chapter 3: Literature review: Theoretical and professional context

Introduction

This chapter expands upon and explains the core theoretical concepts relevant to the thesis. Following examination of the theoretical context of social work practice, issues of expertise, professional identity, and values are explored. Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity and Plumwood’s conception of the ecological crisis of reason are elaborated and their relevance to explaining the social work response to the environmental crisis is explored. Feminist critiques of modernism, in particular eco-feminist approaches, are employed to explain the impact of various modernist forces upon social work. Finally, Denzin’s notion of social work in the seventh moment is used as a vehicle to examine ways in which social work could re-examine its methods and boundaries in a way that ensures its relevance in the future.

Theoretical concepts

This thesis is influenced by theoretical concepts drawn from Denzin’s (2002b) ‘seventh moment’, Bauman’s (2004a; 2004b) theory of liquid modernity and related concepts, Val Plumwood’s (2002) explanations of the irrational thinking that has led to the environmental crisis, links between environmental crisis and social justice, and by the nature of professional practice. Each of the key theoretical concepts will be outlined and discussed. A number of the terms commonly used in this thesis are also defined in this chapter.

Social work in the seventh moment

The concept of the ‘seventh moment’ (Denzin 2002b p.25; see also Denzin and Lincoln 2003, 2008) refers to the current moment in social history and is characterised as a period of ferment and change, punctuated by breaks from the past, a focus on previously silenced voices, increased concern for a moral discourse, and conversations about democracy, politics, race, class, gender, community, freedom and nation (Denzin 2002b). The kind of qualitative inquiry associated with the overall tenor of these interests is associated with the feminist, interpretive and critical paradigms (Denzin and Lincoln 2000). As Denzin (2002b p.26) points out:
In the seventh moment there is a pressing need to show how the practices of critical, interpretive qualitative research can help change the world in positive ways. This is the traditional calling of critical social work. It is necessary to examine new ways of making the practices of critical qualitative inquiry central to the workings of a free democratic society. Further, there is a need to bring these practices more centrally into the curricula and into the interpretive practices of social work research and education.

This is a call for a new way of thinking in social work, a call to let go of self-limiting definitions of practice. Social work need not be defined now in the same way it was in the early twentieth century; the boundaries of professional practice and theoretical interest need not be the same as they have been for the past hundred years. This is a time for social work to embrace new possibilities, including emerging contemporary concerns, and to demonstrate flexibility as a requirement for continuing relevance as a profession. Denzin’s outline of social work in the seventh moment falls broadly within postmodernist approaches to professional practice. Social work theorists such as Allan (2003), Dominelli (2007), Fawcet et al (2000b); Walker (2001), Howe (1994) and Ife and Fook (1999) have explored the relevance of postmodern concepts to social work, noting the emergence of challenges for social work such as how to respond positively and with imagination to the prospect of living with contingency and ambivalence, and without securities, order and guarantees.

While the concept of social work in the seventh moment provides a rationale for the challenge to the boundaries of social work practice implicit in this thesis, the social theory of Zygmunt Bauman provides a further lens through which to examine the concepts and findings in this thesis. Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity, through which he identifies the twin problems of consumerism and globalisation, provide insights for social work theory and practice.

Liquid modernity

Bauman (2004a) describes the western world as having been in a state of ‘solid modernity’ up until the second half of the twentieth century. ‘Solid modernity’ considered events such as ‘accidents, contingencies, under-determination, sudden, unexpected, surprising, sometimes harrowing turns of events, as temporary irritants’ and exemplified belief in the ability to achieve a ‘fully rational perfect world, rationally perfect, or perfectly rational’ (Bauman 2004a p.3). Bauman (2004a p.3) describes the condition of solid modernity as resistant to change, although constantly striving for perfection, and incorporates a belief that it was simply:
a matter of acquiring enough information, enough knowledge, and enough technological skills in order to achieve such a perfect world. Change was seen as temporary until we construct a world which won’t require further change.

Over the last fifty years, Bauman (2004a) argues, the world has been moving toward a state of ‘liquid modernity’; similar to a substance that does not hold a particular shape for long. One characteristic of liquid modernity is that we have given up on the idea of perfection, that it may never be achieved because change is ever-present. Such a state of change and flux requires different forms of behaviour, and forms of contact between people that are more appropriate to living in a time of constant change. Old habits and customs may no longer be suitable, may even be potentially counterproductive, in a rapidly changing world. Living in this liquid world, according to Bauman (2004a p.8), breaks down into three conditions:

- We need to act under the condition of first: uncertainty; second: under the condition of continuous risk which we try to calculate but which in principle is not fully calculable, as there are always surprises; and third: we need to act under the condition of shifting trust.

The three conditions culminate in a ‘highly competitive consumer market society’ (Bauman 2004a p.9). Gane (2001 p.269) summarises the effects of liquid modernity upon people’s lives as ‘in short, there are no longer traditional patterns, codes, rules or ‘pre-allocated reference groups’ that individuals can look to as stable orientation points in their lives and be guided by’. The result of this lack of solid reference points is that ‘individuals now face an array of conflicting life-choices on their own’ and that they face them in ‘increasing isolation and with little prospect of assistance from any collective body or system’ (Gane 2001 p.269).

Consumerism and globalisation are the twin features that Bauman identifies as major signifiers of the liquid modern condition (Atkinson 2008).

Globalisation refers to the increasing use of new technologies of communication, which have radically changed the meaning of distance and the mobility of capital and social elites (Abrahamson 2003). Bauman contends that globalisation has led to changing forms of social stratification and increasing polarisation of the rich and the poor. Consumerism refers to the change that Bauman notes between a former understanding of people as producers in the modern world to people as consumers in a post-modern society. ‘The consumer is a person on the move and is bound to remain so’ (Bauman 2004a p.85).
The fluidity with which Bauman defines the liquid modern condition means very different things, though, to the cultural elites (labelled by Bauman as ‘the tourists’) with ready access to the advantages of globalisation, than it does to poor or disadvantaged minorities (labelled by Bauman as ‘the vagabonds’). ‘The tourists live in time; to them space does not matter, because they can easily overcome any distance. On the contrary, the vagabonds live in space: they are very much confined to the ghetto, from which it is difficult to escape’ (Abrahamson 2003). The vagabond’s abilities as a consumer are flawed, as their ability to consume is limited by access to resources. The tourist, on the other hand, is in a position to take ready advantage of the consumer goods on offer, in any part of the world, and this quality makes the tourist a highly valued member of the consumer society.

Bauman (2004a p.10) cites the work of Gregory Bateson, who described a level of learning whereby people have ‘the ability to dismantle the cognitive frames, to reject the rules, to reassemble something completely different’. Bauman (2004a p.10) contends that if such a level of learning signifies, as Bateson claims, a level of madness, then ‘perhaps contemporary culture contains a touch of madness’. The possibility of madness as an affliction of contemporary society as raised by Bauman is synchronous with the analyses of both Diamond and Wright, as related earlier in this chapter. Diamond and Wright both gave multiple historical examples of societies that headed inexplicably toward annihilation for the sake of upholding long-held socio-cultural practices in the face of impending environmental devastation. The theme of irrationality is expounded also in the works of eco-feminist author Val Plumwood (2002) as she casts light on the crisis of reason in the current age and the way forward for humanity.

**A crisis of reason**

Plumwood (1996; 2002) traces the causes of the environmental crisis to the dualist thinking that she identifies in Western society, and details the ways in which post-Enlightenment dualisms have been responsible for humans’ separation from nature. Plumwood (2002 p.16) argues that a Western myth of humanity’s ‘disembeddedness’ from nature has been facilitated by worldwide trends toward urbanisation and globalisation, thus creating a situation whereby people are generally remote from the sources of their food, clothing and housing materials. In such a setting, Plumwood argues, it has become much easier for individuals and for Western society generally to be unaware of the consequences of lifestyles upon the environment. Of course, it may not hold as necessary that individual irrationality or madness are definitively responsible for current
environmental problems, but at the very least an issue of unintended consequences of past and present behaviour should be considered.

Echoing the analysis of Diamond and Wright as discussed in the Introduction to this thesis, Plumwood (2002 p.236) claims that:

*The Empire of Men over mere things, which some call modernity and others rationality, will topple along with the other empires. The illusion of Reason’s absolute power over and remoteness from nature it is built on may take somewhat longer to self-destruct than most illusions of empire, but its eventual demise is unavoidable.*

For Plumwood, the rationality that has resulted in the environmental crisis during our time is ultimately suicidal and is based on illusions developed and shored up in the economic, scientific and ethical spheres. A combination of ignorance, self-interest and illusion have worked together and reinforced one another ‘to create a larger ecologically irrational response that is embedded in the very framework and structure of our thought systems’ (Plumwood 2002 p.237).

Plumwood cites the increasingly unequal distribution of power inherent in contemporary politics and governance as propelling society toward ecological collapse because ‘it skews decision-making against changing destructive practices and disables corrective forces’ (Plumwood 2002 p.237). Of particular concern to Plumwood is the realisation that people who benefit from the current system have the least reason to change, and perhaps harbour a sense of being able to buy their way out of the ecological collapse. This leads to a situation that ‘allows privileged subjects to harbour illusions of ecological disembeddedness and invulnerability to an extreme degree, far greater degree than for other subjectivities’ (Plumwood 2002 p.237). Hence issues of inequality and unfair distribution of resources remain unresolved, and could potentially lead to a situation whereby wealthier people are able to buy more food, for example, even though its production is unsustainable and the price is rising.

The incidence, pattern and challenging consequences of dualist logic within dominant rationalist modes of reason are presented by Plumwood (2002) as foundational to the interconnected oppressions of not only nature and women, but also of the poor, and of colonised races. The solution, Plumwood argues, is through development of a place-sensitive culture that can situate both humans ecologically and nonhumans ethically. Place-sensitive culture is a critical
consideration for social workers if the profession is to develop frameworks for practice that include nature and understanding of humanity’s environmental context.

Plumwood’s concept of a place-sensitive culture broadly supports the person-as-place concept that Zapf (2009) has advocated for the development of social work theory and practice. Both recognise the problems that have arisen, particularly in Western societies, in association with widespread industrialisation and urbanisation. Both seek to develop an enhanced embeddedness of humanity in nature, in recognition of the interlinked future and fortunes of each.

Many other social and philosophical theorists have established cohesive analyses of contemporary Western society, some of which are highly relevant to this study. Social theorists such as Habermas (2007a; 2007b; 2007c) and Bourdieu (1990; 1993) can cast light upon the impact of systemic pressures upon the internal world of individuals. However Bauman and Plumwood together provide a complementary view of society that incorporates both social and philosophical understandings considered particularly relevant to this thesis.

**Defining central concepts**

A range of common terms are used throughout this thesis. Each is defined and discussed below so that the reader will have an understanding of the sense in which each is used.

**Nature**

The concept of ‘nature’ is a highly contested one, particularly as it is debated in arguments about the ‘nature-culture divide’ (Uggla 2010; Beck 2010; Cudworth 2003). Uggla (2010 p.79) argues that humans’ preoccupation with notions of ‘wilderness’ representing ‘pure’ nature illustrates humans’ ‘deeply ambivalent relationship with nature, which oscillates between romantic devotion to nature and attempts to conquer it’. In fact, idealisation of wilderness as pure nature demonstrates the nature-culture dualism that has developed over millennia and has the overall effect of confining nature to the category of ‘other’ (Plumwood 2003; Uggla 2010). Nature might be better understood as a set of ‘socio-cultural arrangements’ (Uggla 2010 p.80), accepting that there is no one single ‘nature’, but a ‘diversity of contested natures constituted through socio-cultural processes from which they cannot be separated’ (Uggla 2010 p.81). Nature can therefore be defined as having a meaning that is in a state of continuous negotiation in relation to society and human culture.
A danger inherent in any definition of humans as separate from natural systems implies that humans, and all their activity, are, by definition, non-natural (Plumwood 2003; Uggla 2010). Uggla (2010 p.87) contends that:

*By treating humans and nature as inter-related, discussions of environmental protection and social justice could focus on how to reduce human vulnerability and accomplish sustainable living conditions, instead of being caught in futile negotiations around how to define and distinguish natural and human impacts.*

The term ‘nature’ is used in this thesis in an inclusive sense, recognising that humans and society are part of nature, and also that Western society has a history of separating the two. This dilemma is an inherent aspect of the discussion.

**Social justice**

Social justice is defined by the AASW (2000 p.4) as a core value for social workers, encompassing: satisfaction of basic human needs; equitable distribution of resources; fair access; recognition if individual and community rights and duties; equal legal treatment and protection; and social development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare. Social workers are understood to have an obligation to promote social justice, particularly for people or groups of people who are ‘oppressed or victimized by discrimination’ (Zastrow 1999 p.51). In fact, Zastrow (1999) couples the promotion of social justice by social workers with the obligation to promote economic justice, recognising that oppression related to ethnicity, gender, culture, age, class, religion, or disability is generally tied to economic deprivation. Links between social and economic justice are widely accepted in the social work literature, where economic justice is commonly related to issues of employment access, income security, and income parity (Ife 2002; Fitzgibbon and Hargreaves 2001, 2005).

Social justice, while a commonly used term in the welfare environment, is a contested one (Valentine 2004; Solas 2008). Solas (2008) argues that it is unclear exactly what kind of social justice social work supports, stemming as the term does from broader conceptions of justice that may not only differ from, but possibly also conflict with one another. For this reason it is important for social work to be clear about the form of social justice it supports, and to ensure it is a form of justice that is defendable by the profession and as egalitarian as possible.
**Environmental justice**

Environmental justice as a term became popular in the USA in the 1980’s, and since then has spread around the world. While a relatively new term, it reflects a long-standing recognition of the ways in which minority groups and low-income populations have been inequitably impacted upon by a range of environmental burdens (Woodruff and Tony 2004; Woodward and Simms 2006; Steger and Filcak 2009). The environmental justice movement is described as a confluence of three great challenges: the struggle against racism and poverty (Hines 2001); the effort to conserve and improve the natural environment; and the need to change social institutions away from class division and environmental depletion toward social unity and global sustainability (National People of Color Environmental Leadership Summit, in Matsuoka 2003).

**Social sustainability**

Social sustainability is described by Black (2005) as ‘the extent to which social values, social identities, social relationships and social institutions are capable of being maintained into the future’. Other authors have sought to understand the practices that might be needed in order to encourage or ensure social sustainability. MacKenzie (2004), for example, identifies the following features of the condition of social sustainability:

- equity of access to key services (including health, education, transport, housing and recreation);
- equity between generations, meaning that future generations will not be disadvantaged by the activities of the current generation;
- a system of cultural relations in which the positive aspects of disparate cultures are valued and protected, and in which cultural integration is supported and promoted when it is desired by individuals and groups;
- the widespread political participation of citizens not only in electoral procedures but also in other areas of political activity, particularly at a local level;
- a system for transmitting awareness of social sustainability from one generation to the next;
- a sense of community responsibility for maintaining that system of transmission;
- mechanisms for a community to collectively identify its strengths and needs;
- mechanisms for a community to fulfil its own needs where possible through community action; and
- mechanisms for political advocacy to meet needs that cannot be met by community action.

This is not an exhaustive list, but does capture many of the conditions needed to ensure as far as possible that social values, social identities, social relationships and social institutions are capable of being maintained into the future.

Social sustainability is a term, and possibly a concept, that has not yet gained widespread use in the social work literature.

**Social work as professional practice**

It is useful to consider the nature of professional practice as social work is generally considered to be a profession (Healy 2005; Thompson 2000; O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 1998; Wilson et al 2008). Practice is defined by Higgs, McAllister and Whiteford (2009 p.101) as ‘the enactment of the role of a profession or occupational group in serving or contributing to society’. One way of interpreting practice is to characterise it as ‘doing, knowing, being and becoming’ (Higgs and Tichen 2001, in Higgs and Cherry 2009 p.3). In this characterisation, doing and knowing frame the immediate dimensions of practice, and being and becoming frame the more ephemeral and lived dimensions.

The labelling of social work as a profession is not an uncontested notion. O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund (1998) make it clear that the concept of professional status can be an aspiration, or can hold an aura, that does not necessarily sit comfortably with social work’s stated goals and practices. A preoccupation with the development of models is argued by some to perhaps point to a certain lack of confidence among social workers in regard to their skills and status, and seeking the status of ‘professional’ possibly marks a process of mystification (O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 1998). Ife (1997b) notes that the hierarchic, top-down approaches associated with the professional and managerial realms of practice are in marked contrast to the anarchic, bottom-up approaches associated with social work’s stated values.

Nevertheless, Ife (1997b) identifies that social work practice within a professional discourse has a governing principle associated with service, with the social worker assumed to possess the skills and expertise to be able to determine the most appropriate outcome for a service user. In order
to be considered humanist, professional practice needs to be associated with another governing principle – that services are tailored to meet the defined needs of the individual, with appropriate outcomes defined in consultation with the individual (Wilson et al 2008).

Historically, the concept of ‘profession’ received little critical attention until the 1970’s (Wilson et al 2008). Until that time, professions were presumed to be good for the development of society, able to provide a service based on the advanced knowledge and skill of their practitioners (Wilson et al 2008). The developing analysis of professions since the 1970’s criticised issues such as: the ways in which professions were seen to be maximising their own power over those who sought their services; primarily securing their own interests; attempting to secure power relative to other professions; and engaging in a process that sought to maximise occupational control over the work of their members (Epstein 1999; Wilson et al 2008). Wilson et al (2008) propose a ‘new professionalism’ mantle for social work; one that recognises the relational nature of social work practice and the importance given to the service-user voice. For Wilson et al, authenticity is the crucial element that needs to be incorporated into social work notions of professionalism, and is based on acknowledgement of the various tensions that social workers must mediate and recognition of the importance of the quality of relationships. This view of social work melds well with the broader definition of professional practice outlined earlier in this section by Higgs and Tichen (2001) and Higgs, McAllister and Whiteford (2009). In this way, the notion of service to society is combined with ‘doing knowing, being and becoming’ (Higgs and Tichen 2001, in Higgs and Cherry 2009 p.3), thus forming a new version of professionalism.

**The theoretical context of social work practice**

While social work takes different forms in the various countries in which it is practised, social work in Australia is largely conceived as having a domain that focuses on the interaction between individuals and their social environment (see, for example, O’Connor, Wilson and Setterlund 2003; Healy 2005). The AASW (2000) code of ethics refers to social work as being about human wellbeing. Such emphases characterise social work as an activity that belongs solely in the human social realm. And although some Australian social work theorists (see, for example, Fook and Pease 1999; Healy 2001; Allan, Pease and Briskman 2003) have advocated the benefits of embracing uncertainty and a more nuanced approach to knowledge building through development of a postmodern understanding, the conceptualised realm of social work practice has remained largely unchanged since its beginnings in most countries throughout the industrialised world (Coates 2003a; Zapf 2009).
Howe (1994) locates the birth of social work within the nineteenth century’s growing ideas about the relationship of the individual to society. Social work can be seen to have emerged ‘in the space between the two major nineteenth century discourses of wealth and poverty’ (Howe 1994 p.517), with the joint aim of pursuing both a just society and a satisfying quality of life ‘by using the insights of the social sciences’ (Howe 1994 p.518). The impact on social work of its formation during the modernist period is the idea that progress can be achieved via systematic analysis combined with rational planning (Howe 1994). Overall then, ‘this typically modernist pursuit assumes that there is something constant, concrete and fixed about social work’ (Howe 1994 p.519).

The development of social work theory can be understood as aligned with social constructionism, a philosophy that locates the development of knowledge within the intersubjective framework of social relations and human experiences (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Social constructionism explores the processes by which meanings are construed to experiences and to social practices (Williams 1996; Parton and O’Byrne 2000), emphasising the social nature of life, relationships, identity, and institutions. Lived experience is considered to be more valuable than ideas in theory. A major focus on formal knowledge is viewed as limiting and unproductive; as such a narrow viewpoint limits understanding of the contextual and social frameworks for the development of useful systems of knowledge. A focus on formal theory potentially undervalues other forms of knowledge that comprise the vast majority of lived experience (Berger and Luckmann 1991). Thus social work practice draws on a combination of lived experiences, social constructionism, and formal theory (Cox and Hardwick 2002).

Healy (2005) describes five major contemporary theories of professional practice in social work: problem solving; systems perspectives; the strengths perspective; anti-oppressive social work; and postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial approaches. Healy’s criterion for selecting these theories is based on, firstly, their relevance to the contemporary institutional contexts of health and welfare services; secondly, their relevance to the purpose of social work as it is constructed through its value base and within contemporary practice contexts; thirdly, relevance of the theories to the formal knowledge base of social work; and fourthly, their ability to extend the boundaries of the social work theory base. The absence of other perspectives that have influenced social work practice, such as psychodynamic approaches, is acknowledged by Healy (p103), but explained as a necessary absence due to the rare use of such resource-intensive approaches within the constraints of contemporary practice.

The ‘post’ theories - postmodern, poststructural and postcolonial approaches – represent the most recent set of influences upon social work theory development, and are characterised by an
emphasis upon reflexivity and recognition of context and individual differences in constructing an understanding of client or community needs, as well in practice purposes (Healy 2005). Postmodernism, for example, is concerned with recognising the individuality of need and understanding, with the localisation of responses, and with the rejection of forms that assume certainty of current ‘knowing’ and of future expectation (Allan 2003; Pease and Briskman 2003).

Development of social work theory in relation to nature and the environmental context of practice overall is located in the realm of these postmodern approaches. Allan (2003) theorises critical social work in the context of both modernist and postmodern approaches by taking the position that modernist social work approaches focus on addressing material issues through politicisation and collectivisation of social problems, while postmodern approaches affirm difference and locate people in their historical and cultural contexts. In this way, Allan (2003) notes, change is sought through locating possibilities for resistance and for challenging dominant discourses at local sites, and she summarises her position in a quote from Pozzuto (cited in Allan 2003), who wrote ‘the task of critical social work is to lift the veil of the present to see the possibilities of the future’.

The nature of social work requires practice that responds sensitively to individuals, groups and communities, so most social workers engage in theory building in a tacit and informal way as their understandings are expressed through direct practice and, sometimes, shared among immediate colleagues (Healy 2005). Linking environmental awareness and action with social work theory and practice involves ‘[lifting] the veil of the present to see the possibilities of the future’ (Pozzuto 2000). Environmentally-aware (or ecologically-aware, or eco-centric; or eco-justice) theory and practice requires a social work response to some of the major social concerns of our age. Issues such as global warming, climate change, loss of biodiversity, habitat destruction, pollution of land, sea, and air, are central concerns for a majority of the population around the world. An additional consideration for social work is that these concerns are not just isolated worries: evidence is accumulating that individuals and whole communities are being directly affected by negative environmental factors (McMichael 2003; 2004; et al 2006). Issues of wellbeing, health and livelihood are at stake (Lam 2007; McMichael 2003; McMichael et al 2006). The proponents of environmentally-aware social work call for development of practice models that account for the environments of the people with whom we work, and for social work education that incorporates environmental concerns and links environmental leadership with social work practice.
Development of social work theory as it relates to the environment is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

**Theorising the environment in social work**

In Australia, Ife (2002) has developed a theoretical foundation for consideration of society as living in harmony with nature through his community development practice model. In this model, an ecological – social justice nexus is conceived as being at the very centre of community development practice. Holism, sustainability, diversity and equilibrium are the major ecological considerations, while structural disadvantage, empowerment, needs and rights are the major social justice considerations. Ife (p. 78) has based this model in the eco-centric analyses of Fox (1990) and Eckersley (1992), both of whom emphasise the value of all living things and locate the human species as one part of the larger ecological whole in which all parts have intrinsic value. The eco-centric perspective does not view the human species as dominant or deserving of special consideration. Such a value base for a practice model is a major challenge to social work, which has a history of anthropocentrism (Coates 2003a) as demonstrated through its codes of ethics, methods, and central concerns. An additional consideration is that Ife’s model is aimed specifically at community development rather than at social work as a whole. He rejects the notion of social work as a professional project (Ife 1997), and positions community development as an activity that is most ideally conducted as a grass-roots activity.

Coates (2003a) further developed the theory base supporting social work interest in the environment through an analysis that links modernity, ecology and social work. He argues that the Western focus on the individual and competition is behind a general attitude of indifference, indeed blindness, to human connectedness with the natural world. Through his analysis, Coates posits a paradigmatic shift that calls for social work to become a major contributor and leader in the transformation of Western society towards global consciousness and environmental wellbeing. In this conceptualisation, Coates envisages social work practice that emerges from a global consciousness based on an understanding of the unity and connectedness of all things. Such practice will require an expanded environmental awareness in social work, and Coates outlines the new directions in policy and action that will also be required. Much of Coates’ analysis is embedded in a critique of modernist values and shares much with eco-feminist philosophy, which is the subject of a later section in this chapter.
Also underpinning Coates’ vision is the assumption that social workers should take a lead role in the social transformation that will be required in order to deal adequately with environmental imperatives and in developing a new regard for the environment. Coates (2003a p.156) offers three specific objectives for social work during the transformation:

- Nurturing the awareness that human actions and social structures are part of Earth’s evolutionary unfolding and as such should support an opportunity for all species to flourish and continue their contribution to the creative process;

- Awakening ourselves and others to the significance and value of the talents each has to offer, helping people and society to value all of creation as sacred; and

- Promoting the development of communities and social structures that are inclusive, egalitarian and supportive of the creative potential in each person and all life, which involves moving toward an Earth-centred ethical system to replace anthropocentric morality.

For the most part, these objectives do not seem controversial and would be compatible with most social work codes of ethics as they stand – with the exception of the concept of an ‘Earth-centred ethical system’. It is specifically this particular aspect of the objectives defined by Coates that may be unpalatable in some social work quarters. Such an objective is quite contrary to the anthropocentric values base of Western countries’ national codes of social work ethics, focussed as they are on human dignity and worth, and lacking in reference to the non-human world.

The eco-social model presented by Narhi (2004) explores the significant aspects facing social workers as they attempt to incorporate ecological / environmental understanding into their practice. The features identified by Narhi that will need extensive social work consideration are: expansion of holistic human-in-environment perspectives; emancipatory and political power constellations; and heterogeneous knowledge production. The issue of expertise is a critical aspect of Narhi’s study. The extent to which social workers generally see themselves as able to comment upon or to be a part of action aimed at environmental change is disputable, and is explored in the next section.

Canadian social work author, Zapf (2009, p.179), proposes the concept of ‘people as place’ as an alternative to the foundational person-in-environment metaphor in social work. Zapf’s proposal is built on the idea that, although the physical environment has generally been ignored or rendered irrelevant in mainstream social work literature, there are more fully developed perspectives on
the environment to be found at the margins of social work. Rural / remote social work, for example, recognises the importance of context by promoting practice that is context sensitive and embedded in the local community, thus embodying an appreciation of geography as it affects both where and how people live. Zapf (2009 p.181) argues that ‘People experience and express an attachment to place, a sense of belonging. Places have meaning for people; identity is connected to place’. Such an attachment, he proposes, engenders a sense of stewardship and responsibility for a healthy physical environment. The spirituality and social work movement, as well as social work with Aboriginal people, are offered by Zapf as further examples of the marginal aspects of social work that have a more fully developed perspective on the environment. In these examples he finds linkages between worldview and place, or ‘geopsyche’, and the environment, or ‘spiritual landscapes’ (Zapf 2009 p.182).

The notion of geographical embeddedness as an important factor in rural and remote social work practice in Australia has been emphasised by a range of authors (Cheers and Taylor 2001 and 2005; Alston 2005; Cheers, Darracott and Lonne 2005). Beck (2010 p.258) claims that, as world public awareness grows about the ways in which the nation-state system is destabilized by global risks such as climate change, affecting both developed and underdeveloped nations alike, ‘then something historically new can emerge, namely a cosmopolitan vision in which people see themselves as both part of an endangered world and as part of their local histories and survival situations’.

International social work literature has shown a marked increase in interest in the concept of environmental citizenship (Zapf 2009), connecting issues of oppression and exclusion from environmental decision-making with a global ecological agenda. Ife (2008) raises the issue of human rights at international levels, and argues for a social work practice orientation around the collective human rights of whole communities, such as the right to clean air and water. Zapf (2009) asks whether there is a human right to a healthy and supportive environment, and in an extension of this concept, whether the natural world has the right to protection from degradation, pollution, and destruction. Increasing interest in the incorporation of human rights’ perspectives in social work curricula in Australian universities may provide increasing future momentum for a social work critique of practices that infringe upon large-scale collective human rights, such as clean air and water.
A noticeable factor in regard to this range of publications on social work and the environment is that they are for the most part to be found in individual books. I would argue that the majority of social workers in practice receive their information about trends in social work theory and practice from journals issued by their professional association, often as part of their membership package. Thus, while there is some attention to social work and the environment, it is not accessible to the majority of social work practitioners.

**The issue of expertise**

Developments in understanding of the environmental situation in which humanity finds itself present distinct challenges to the skills and knowledge base of social work practice. Social workers are faced with several paradoxical dilemmas. On the one hand, social, economic and environmental systems are viewed as ‘inextricably linked’ (WCED 1987), and on the other, social workers do not generally receive any formal education about environmental issues. A majority of social workers are concerned about environmental / ecological issues (AASW 2001), yet the boundaries of their professional identity are firmly bound within the sphere of social systems. Many codes of ethics of professional social work associations have incorporated the notion of environmental / ecological links with social work practice, yet the members of associations such as the AASW have not been given any training or instruction that might advise them how to put this ethical requirement into practice.

‘Expertise’ is a difficult concept to define, and can be impacted upon by personal values and ideologies, as well as changeable or unpredictable situations (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 1997). Such dilemmas are represented in the model devised by Narhi (2004, as shown at appendix no. 1), which she developed as a result of her study aimed at locating and exploring the potential of social workers to act as one actor and source of expertise in questions related to eco-socially sustainable and inclusive living environments. Her goal was to identify the knowledge base and action through which social workers constructed their eco-social expertise in such environments, in and from their practice. The development, through practice, of a responsive knowledge base is indicative of the kinds of challenges that modernisation processes present to social work in responding to these challenges in their everyday work. Social workers’ solutions in everyday practice could potentially be ‘more of the same’ (Beck 1994), or could reflect something quite different – potentially alternative ways of acting and thinking.
Notions of modern expertise have been based in scientific, professional and institutional paradigms (Fook et al 2000; Narhi 2004). The modern professions have been the subject of much discussion regarding the transition to ‘expert’. Giddens (1994), for example, refers to the potential of experts as organisers of modern reflexivity. He argues that trust in expertise is a precondition for the dissembling of traditional society from the time-space continuum. This trust, he continues, explains why experts are becoming ‘consultants’ instead of ‘guards’, and responsibility for life choices is being shifted to individuals (Giddens 1994). Beck (1992; 1994) maintains that expertise has a dual role: on the one hand experts are ‘gatekeepers’ of the monopoly on knowledge, and on the other hand they are also the ‘breakers’ of that monopoly.

The theoretical base of a profession is an important aspect of expertise. Social work theorising appears to be more to do with underlying assumptions, use of specific concepts, and development of an intuitive form of practice wisdom than about using ‘articulated integrated theoretical frameworks’ (Fook et al 1997 p.407). For social workers who seek to incorporate a nature / environmental focus into practice, it may be useful to clarify ‘the difference between declarative or substantive knowledge (information about facts, concepts and relationships) about a particular domain on the one hand, and procedural or strategic knowledge (information about how to reason with declarative knowledge, and how to make decisions when criteria conflict and effects of action are unpredictable) on the other’ (Fook et al 1997 p.410).

Fook et al (1997 p.410) argue that any claim that experts can only operate within a specialist domain assumes a declarative or substantive view of knowledge, but if crucial knowledge is conceptualised as more procedural or strategic, ‘then it may be that this type of knowledge is applicable across practice fields’. Fook et al (1997 p.413) conclude that expert social work is a ‘complex, adaptive and flexible’ phenomenon, concerning processes that can be applied across settings, and involves making connections in often novel and unpredictable circumstances.

The issue of expertise is interconnected with the notion of professional identity, which is the subject of the next section of this chapter.

**Professional identity**

**Social work history and identity**

Social work is widely regarded as a profession. For some it is a recognised profession, while for others its status as a profession is emerging (Farley, Smith and Boyle 2009). The history of
Australian social work, and indeed the history of social work in most Western nations, reveals debate over competing visions of the social realm (Parton 1996). Despite this evidence of divergence, social work’s professional identity is conceptualised such that consensus and shared values and goals among social workers are emphasised. Professional identity is defined by Carpenter and Platt (1997), for example, through identification with traditional social work values. Exploration and understandings of conflict and power, a central aspect of social work theories about social relations, are not consistently applied to current understandings of professional identity.

Social work practice is defined by some writers as the presentation of the ‘professional self’ (see, for example, Narhi 2004). Others define professional identity as ‘a common core of agreed-on beliefs, values and interests among members (Bogo, Raphael and Roberts 1993 p.279), as seen in the codes of ethics of various social work associations around the world. Professionalism is understood by Kelly, Alexander and Cullinane (1986 p.7) as ‘a shared purpose, mission, goal, value system, and code of ethics, plus a sense of unity, and association’. Such definitions again indicate an understanding of the social work profession as founded in consensus rather than in conflict and exercise of power.

Not all social work writers accept such a benign view of social work and its professional identity. Hugman (1998 p.55) describes the acquisition of professional status for social work as ‘occupational aggrandisement’, while Ife (1997 p.7) sees the acquisition of this status as ‘elitism’. Marxist theory, with its emphasis on conflict and power, had a major impact on social work thought in the 1960’s and 1970’s, a period of strong and sustained wealth and economic growth in Australia, when high value was placed on fairness and human rights. This context gave rise to collective analyses of the causes of social problems, rather than a focus on individual client deficits. The provision of social work services reflected the tension between responding to the real needs of the poor on the one hand, and the dominance of the ruling class on social policy and ideologies about the poor.

Disquiet about the power of middle class professionals and the class divisions created by professional power and prestige are still evident in the social work literature (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 2000; Healy 2005). The status of professionals is articulated through the social recognition of tertiary qualifications and commensurate salaries, opportunities to work in contexts of significant autonomy compared with non-professional groups, and social esteem achieved
through respectability (Mullaly 1997). The dominant arguments against professionalisation and professionalism include charges of exploitation and social control, which view social workers as co-opted by the State to carry out functions that oppress groups in society who are already disadvantaged and marginalised.

Uneasiness about the label of ‘professional’ and potential for control over the lives of others can foster ambivalence about social workers’ professional identity. Goldstein (1999 p.3), for example, explains how in conceiving itself as a profession, social work did not ‘flaunt … the mantle as did other professions’. Conceptions of professional identity in the social work literature are inextricably bound up in disagreements over power, prestige, and social control. Nevertheless, much of the literature appears to assume a generally positive identification among social workers with social work as the norm.

Fook, Ryan and Hawkins (1994) explored the issue of social work education as having an important function in socialising new members into ‘competent and acceptable members’, a view that is reminiscent of Bourdieu’s (1990) analysis of the professions generally (Fram 2004; Emirbayer and Williams 2005; Houston 2002, 2009). However, Fook et al’s (1997) longitudinal study revealed that, in social work, the combination of complexities associated with developing a professional self, including integrating personal and professional identities, and disillusionment with the nature of the profession, particularly the powerlessness of social work, suggests that negative professional identity may be an expected, although temporary, aspect of professional identity for social workers early in their career. Fook et al (1997) found that concerns among social workers about lack of power and autonomy altered as the participants in their study gained experience and self-confidence, and became more comfortable with the weight of professional roles and authority. With greater experience, Fook et al (1997) identified that the focus of professional identity shifted toward performance, employability, and the level of knowledge and skills. Understanding of professional identity among social workers is therefore better conceptualised not as static and stable model, but as a dynamic and developmental process.

Values and ethics

The range of expansive and dissimilar fields of social work practice demonstrates that social work is a diverse profession that arguably has used values and ethics as a basis for unity and consensus (Healy 2005). There are inherent complexities in constructing professional boundaries in this way. Social work writing can tend towards a didactic tone that emphasises the vocational aspects of the
profession in an attempt to maintain boundaries (Howe 1994). Further, the social justice and humanitarian values used to define social work are not restricted to the social work profession (see, for example, Ife 2002). At best, this combination of factors leads to a tenuous sense of coherent professional identity.

The growth of a professional identity can be viewed, as it is by some social work writers, as the internalisation of values and ethics (Fook et al 1994, 1997). Professional values and ethics are assumed to be transmitted to novice practitioners as part of the tertiary education process (Bogo et al 1993), also referred to in the literature as professional socialisation (Fook et al 1994). Such conceptualisations of professional development contain some elements of the ‘tabula rasa’ theories of child development, and assume that it is the student who does all the changing in response to their new learning. There is a need to understand how social work and its newer members are mutually constructing a shared identity as demonstrated through developing values and ethics.

Miller and Rodwell (1997) argue that a positive professional identity requires congruence between personal values and ethical requirements of the profession and the agency. Since the core values and principles of social work are seen as the ‘linchpin’ of the profession (Reamer 1998 p.448), personal values that conflict with social work values can be seen as creating ‘dissonance’ (Miller and Rodwell 1997 p.73). The imperatives of the current environmental situation require that the ethics and values of social work undergo close re-examination. In their current iteration, most national social work associations’ codes of ethics not only fail to address the environmental context of practice and humanity’s connectedness to nature, they do not consider the dilemmas of congruence that are inflicted upon social workers who are already aware of environmental issues and are attempting to practice in a pro-environmental manner. Coates (2003a p.39) argues that the continuing narrow focus of Western social work upon people and their social environment is evidence of a ‘domesticated profession’ – a profession that has not seriously called into question the processes and beliefs at the basis of ever-increasing economic expansion and the exploitation of resources.

Changes in social policy in recent decades have seen increasing levels of deregulation and competition in welfare contexts, which present ethical challenges for social work. Organisational contexts have a substantial impact on professional ethics. Ethical principles are not absolute, but vary according to the context of practice and the client group. For example, social work education
and literature generally pays scant attention to the complex issues involved in working with involuntary clients. As a result, social workers must translate social work theory and value for themselves to fit with the context in which they work.

Social workers can find themselves in a similar situation in regard to environmental imperatives because there is little or no direction in the various codes of ethics to help them address the ethical conflicts that arise when human need or desire is in direct (or sometimes indirect) divergence with non-human needs. Such a conflict might arise, for example, in relation to housing development that is needed for an increasing population where the proposed location involves the destruction of bushland that provides valuable wildlife habitat. In times past, there may have been no contest: human needs were always assumed to over-ride non-human needs (Plumwood 2002). The issue that may have saved bushland might have been in regard to existing residents’ views, or other amenity, or considerations about catchment management, for example. The needs of local or migratory wildlife would not have provided a reason to over-ride human needs. However, there is increasing recognition that ever-expanding human settlements have negative effects on the natural environment that, in turn, can have multiple negative effects on humans (McMichael 2004; IPCC 2007; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005, 2006b). There is also increasing recognition that the non-human (or more-than-human) world is entitled to recognition of dignity and worth for its own intrinsic sake, and not simply for its instrumental value to humans (Warren 2000; Plumwood 2002). Such a position raises equity considerations in regard to environmental costs imposed on people who can ill afford to pay them. Social work can take a leadership role in facilitating discussions about such values-issues in the community.

Scrutiny of the values and ethics literature in social work demonstrates the use of prescription to regulate the activities of social work professionals. As Hugman (1998) shows, regulation appears to be an accepted function in sociological conceptualisations of professionalism but reflexivity about this aspect of social work and the way it may inadvertently reinforce social inequalities is absent. If the development of a professional identity can be viewed as the internalisation of values and ethics, then it can be seen from the discussion in this section that social workers are presented with little professional direction to help them navigate an eco-social pathway. If this is the case, then it can be assumed that pro-environmental values and ethics belong in the realm of social workers’ private life because the expressed values and ethics of the social work profession do not assist such social workers to express these values and ethics in their professional life.
The feminist critique of modernism

The label ‘modernity’ refers to the array of beliefs and values that inform and have supported the development of modern Western society. Several foundational movements of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – including the Reformation, Enlightenment, Scientific Revolution and Renaissance – enabled the shift in values and beliefs away from the fatalism associated with nature as the work of God toward rationality and logic as the starting point for development of knowledge. Curiosity and creativity were encouraged, and served to undo much of the privilege of ecclesiastical authority while establishing the physical, material realm as the proper domain of science (Coates 2003a). Rationality remained as modernity expanded, and knowledge came to be seen as arising from systematic and objective investigation.

Warren (2000 p.43) describes ecofeminist philosophy as drawing on ecology and environmentalism, as well as feminism and philosophy ‘in its analysis of human systems of unjustified domination... It assumes that such domination is neither justified nor inevitable’. Ecofeminist theory is predicated upon many of the same foundations that characterise feminist theory, including: analysis of gender relations in society; revealing the marginalisation and othering of women’s interests, women’s work and women’s contributions; and revealing the ways in which patriarchal values and practices have privileged men’s position in society (Braidotti et al 1994; Sandilands 1998; Warren 2000). Ecofeminist theory extends the feminist analysis into less familiar territory, though, by looking at the relationship between the human world and the vast interconnected non-human world (Cuomo 2001; Eckersley 2001; Eckersley et al 1998; Plumwood 2002; Warren 2000; Spretnak 1993; Salleh 2003). Ecofeminist analysis has revealed key similarities between the practices and values that have impacted negatively upon women, and the practices and values that have characterised the relationship between the human world, other human Others (Warren 2000) and the more than human world (Plumwood 2002).

Ecofeminists such as Cuomo (2001); Sandilands (1998), and Warren (2000) argue that a range of artificial dualisms have become entrenched in the rationality of the Western world since the Enlightenment. These artificial dualisms are directly attributable to Enlightenment thinking, and have led to similar outcomes for both women and the non-human world (Besthorn and McMillen 2002; Coates 2003a). Plumwood (2002) argues that such thinking has, in fact, been predominant in Western thought since ancient Greek times, when a wide range of rights, such as the right to vote, belonged to men only in a society that deemed women to be inferior. For Plumwood, the
Enlightenment period was not a new era of domination of women; rather it served to reinforce the artificial dualisms that had already been well in place for around two thousand years, based in ancient Greek ideas about rationality. Modernity, together with its concomitant push toward industrialisation and globalisation and the resultant effects on society, has been the natural result of the enactment of Enlightenment values (Cuomo 2001; Warren 2000) and rationality (Plumwood 2002). The ‘post’ theories now offer a range of critiques of modernity, and new ways of seeing the effects of the enactment of Enlightenment thinking and long-standing definitions of ‘rationality’.

Modernist beliefs and values can be said to have served some parts of society very well. The privilege of reason and rationality over intuition and emotionality served men’s interests, in particular, by enshrining certain dualisms encoded into western culture since ancient Greek times (Plumwood 2002). ‘Dualistic thinking’ is a concept that refers to the radical separation and cultural construction of notions of person/property, respect/use, and subject/object dualisms that serve to commodify people, relationships, and nature. Such commodification enables, supports, and privileges an economic system that relies on market forces and the dominance of free trade (Coates 2003a).

The processes that underpin such commodification create an artificial association between one aspect of the dualism with men and the other side of the dualism with women. So, for example, person = man while property = woman. As Plumwood (2002, p.22) points out, ‘Modern economic rationalism maps the heroic narrative of the modern economy onto the older heroic narrative of the supremacy of male-coded reason and its radical separation from female-coded spheres of the body and emotions’. Thus, through ‘the Enlightenment’, ways of thinking and doing that entrenched male privilege and power came to be associated with reason and rationality, while at the same time women’s ways of thinking and doing became associated with irrationality and lack of reason (Spretnak 1993; Cuomo 2001; Warren 2000). Men, on the one hand, became associated with the thinking and reasoning aspects of ‘culture’, while women became associated with the wild and unpredictable aspects of ‘nature’ (Warren 2000).

Ecofeminists argue that the same sorts of artificial dualisms that have served so well to entrench male power and purposes over hundreds of years have also served to privilege the human world over nature and non-human Others over the same period (Warren 2000). The drive to colonisation that characterised European expansion in the 16th to 19th centuries was possible because non-Western people and cultures were viewed as less than human in the same way that
women were less than human (because human = man). In the same way, the non-human world (comprising ecosystems, plants and non-human animals) was viewed as valuable in so far as it served the purposes of humankind (most notably, men). This instrumental view of the non-human world allowed practices that preserved natural environments for views (in the case of rich property owners), grazing land for stock, or where the land/natural systems were viewed as no threat to human expansion or not immediately needed to serve human needs or purposes (Plumwood 2002). In all other cases, land, animals and natural systems were viewed as exploitable for purposes such as: extraction (through mining, etc); grazing; agricultural/urban expansion; trade; food, clothing, and shelter (Plumwood 2002; Coates 2003a).

In most Western industrialising nations of the 16th to 20th centuries, the landscapes that were valued were modified European landscapes – landscapes in which little evidence of pre-human existence could be seen (Plumwood 2002). Unmodified nature came to be viewed as wild and uncontrolled, as a potential threat to humans, in much the same way that women had to be subdued and controlled in order to vanquish any threats that their ‘wild’ nature might embody. Such attitudes allowed colonisers to enter lands which, although already home to other peoples, could be viewed as ‘terra nullius’ – empty lands, ripe for settlement and exploitation (Plumwood 2002).

Criticisms of ecofeminist positions focus largely on the issue of essentialism, that is, the view that ecofeminists have generalised about the nature of the environment, about women, and about society (Field 2000; Clark 2001; Dordoy and Mellor 2001; Sargisson 2001; Agarwal 1998). This view includes the position that ecofeminists have failed to take context into account, and therefore have assumed women, nature and society to have certain fixed traits (Field 2000). The work of Plumwood is largely credited with revivifying ecofeminism, and with answering the criticisms that had effectively sidelined ecofeminist philosophy, political ecology and debate during the 1990’s (Warren 2000).

**Eco-feminism and social work**

Social work theorists such as Coates (2003a) and Besthorn and McMillen (2002) argue that ecofeminists have exposed the irrationality of Western ways of thinking about nature and ecosystems, and this is relevant to social work because of social work’s foundational thinking, interconnected as it is with modernity. For social work, the modernity paradigm dictates a worldview with an emphasis on rationalism and individualism, thus providing a cultural
conditioning that has contributed to its unquestioned acceptance (Coates 2003a). The dominance of modernist thinking in social work, based in the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, is a primary cause of social work’s inability to define a balanced and comprehensive conceptualisation of person and environment (Besthorn and McMillen 2002).

‘Social work developed and functions within modernity and has been, as a result, limited by its assumptions and boundaries’ (Coates 2003a p.58), and like so many professions, social work shares the underpinning values of modernity – individualism, dualism, materialism and domination (Coates 2003a). In order to achieve its place and status as a profession with the social welfare paradigm, social work ‘embraced the scientific method and endorsed reductionist efforts toward seeking individual clarity’ (Coates 2003a p.58), thus leading to the development of specific intervention methodologies. For this reason, Coates (2003a) claims that modernity has an ideological stranglehold on social work that gets in the way of our accord with nature, affecting even the so-called ‘radical’ traditions within social work. Social work can be viewed as engaging in the practices and accepting the paradigm that upheld the separation of people from nature (see figure 1, p56).

Thus, while social work has promoted human wellbeing, it has neglected to connect the exploitation of nature with the exploitation of people. A reliance on past theories therefore cannot assist social work with a way forward in the current environmental crisis (Coates 2003a). Coates (2003a) posits that social work can play an important role in assisting society to understand that a shift in consciousness is required – a shift away from consumerist values and the dominance of economic growth mentalities, toward relational values and sustainable activities and a ‘steady state and ecological economy’ (Earley 1997, in Coates 2003a p.144). This includes support and action toward world peace, human rights, and social justice, and a commitment to resolving the ecological crisis.

In the context of a debate over modernist and postmodernist ideology, Walker (2001) argues for an interpretive approach to social work practice – one that emphasises the local and specific, while at the same time aspiring to broader political action in the pursuit of ‘social and ecocentric justice’ (p.36). He further argues that such an approach could include the developing discourse of ecofeminism, and identifies ecofeminism as relevant to social work because it offers ‘a synthesis of social and ecocentric purposes and values as a basis for tackling inequalities’ (Walker 2001 p.36).
Postmodernism and social work

Postmodern theories have gained strong traction in social work in recent decades (Noble 2004; Dominelli 2007). In explaining the ‘postmodern turn’ in social work, Dominelli (2007) claims that new social movements have had a major impact upon social work theory and practice, as unitary notions of identity have been broadly challenged. A more nuanced understanding of identity, central to social work theory and practice, can be gained from a complex understanding formed by ‘linking the structural or collective elements of human existence alongside the individual ones’ (Dominelli 2007 p.2).

Social work literature reveals tensions around the impacts of postmodernist positions on social work, and the ‘postmodern’ turn is far from universally accepted. Noble (2004) contends that social work has historically been committed to notions of progress, human rights, self-determination, equality and social justice. She points to the challenge that postmodern critiques represent to social work’s ontological positioning, and finds that the postmodern critique is, in fact, undermining and de-stabilising ‘social work’s intellectual heritage that is based in enlightenment values’ Noble (2004 p.292).

Ife (1997; 2002) is also critical of the postmodern critique and, like Noble, argues that a wholesale rejection of meta-narratives would have a deleterious effect upon social work. The ‘grand narratives’ of human progress, such as humanism, Christianity, Marxism, human rights and social justice, are interpreted by postmodernists as ‘foundationalist, essentialist or totalising theory’ (Powell 2001 p.9). Ife does accept, though, that ‘the postmodern critique is undoubtedly of considerable importance in developing an alternative social work’ (1997 p.92).

The positive aspects of postmodernism that Ife (1997) identifies for social work include: the ways in which it allows for and advocates for the establishment of alternative discourses and realities; the reformulation of the role of expertise and considerable potential for empowerment; its impact as a powerful discourse from which to critique the positivism that is central to managerial and economic rationalist approaches; its requirement for greater acceptance of ambiguity, uncertainty, contradiction and paradox; legitimation of forms of knowledge other than those which rely upon empirical verification; and potential in the formulation of an alternative social work based on the anarchist / humanist perspective. While it has these advantages, Ife (1997; 2002) identifies that in order for postmodernist theory to be truly useful to social work, it must
incorporate a vision of a better society, including a universal understanding of social justice and human rights.

Walker’s (2001 p.37) analysis of the theoretical and ideological maps guiding social work lead him to the conclusion that the most compelling aspect of postmodernism for social work has been its ‘examination and exploration of the overlaps and compatibilities between explanatory and descriptive forms of understanding’. The discourse between modernist and postmodernist thinking can bring about ‘panoramic thinking’ (Walker 2001 p.38) for social workers – explained by Walker as an integrated and disparate model of social work practice that draws on the most utilitarian aspects of modernist and postmodernist thinking, in a form that sees social understanding as pluralistic, and as part of a larger chain of inquiry that challenges discrimination in all its manifestations.

Whilst postmodernity is associated with a growing sense of fragmentation and social disintegration, possibly responsible for a renewed emergence of classical values, the defining paradigm of postmodernism is globalisation (Powell 2001). For social workers, one main consideration of the impact of postmodernity is on our conceptual understanding of the nation state. Bauman (1992 p.32) claims that ‘Postmodernity is marked by a view of the human world as irrevocably pluralistic, split into a multitude of sovereign units and sites of authority, with no horizontal or vertical order’. An increasing focus on globalisation elevates economic values over social values, thus entrenching inequality as an unavoidable factor of life (Bourdieu 2004; Powell 2001). The movement of social work in recent decades ‘away from its historic mission to the poor and oppressed’ toward ‘the pursuit of therapeutic individualism, private practice, autonomy from bureaucratic welfare agencies, and augmented status and income’ (Specht and Courtney 1994 in Powell 2001 p.13) is claimed to have led social work into a market-determined agenda, thus forsaking its claim to professionalism (Powell 2001). Consumerism, a key facet of globalisation, has become a central paradigm in welfare reform (Powell 2001).

Despite its shortcomings, including a tendency toward fragmentation and polarisation, Powell (2001 p.15) finds that ‘postmodernity has engendered social participation and more sophisticated forms of communication between people that promote empathy and trust. This is the paradox of contemporary civilisation’. The postmodern condition opens up, according to Powell (2001 p.22), the possibility of a new paradigm for social work. One suggestion is ‘the adoption of the contemporary concept of sustainable development’ based upon the discourse of international
human rights conventions and national social rights and citizenship modalities’, seen by Monediaire (1998 in Powell 2001 p.22) as a strategy of global social prevention. Powell sees the forces of postmodernism as representing a shift towards a more democratic open society based upon a renewed interest in citizenship, participation and empowerment. ‘Social work’s future will very much depend on how it responds to these new forces’, Powell (2001 p.24) concludes.

Figure 1 summarises the argument in this thesis about the effect of modernism on social work, most notably in regard to its effect on the positioning of and regard for nature and the physical environment in social work theory and practice.

**Figure 1: Inclusion / exclusion of nature and the natural environment in social work**

The diagram above encapsulates the information and concepts that have become evident through the literature review and the examination of key concepts. Overall, the literature revealed that modernism has influenced social work theories, values and ethics, notions of expertise, and professional identity. Modernism has exercised this effect principally through the acceptance and practice of dualistic thinking / categorisation, the notion of linear development and progress, and the concept of progress itself. Through this process, nature and the natural environment came to be accepted as existing outside of the socio-cultural realm that was identified as the focus of social work practice. Indeed, nature has been marginalised entirely in Western society and its irrelevance to social work is merely a symptom of the broad Western attitude toward nature and humanity’s environmental context.
At the heart of the diagram is the issue of inclusion / exclusion of nature and the natural environment in social work. While the forces of modernism, impacting as they have upon the central concerns of social work, have acted to exclude nature and the natural environment from consideration in social work theory, education and practice, the forces of post-modernism and the understanding of social-environmental connections revealed by eco-feminism have the opposite effect. Social constructionism, non-universal value orientations, understanding of the effects of power, and the breakdown of professional borders have all developed hand in glove with the evolution of postmodern understandings.

The impacts of modernism help to explain social work’s general reluctance to accept nature and humanity’s broader environmental context as relevant to the social work discourse. Coupled with the impacts of post-modernism and eco-feminism, a clearer understanding is found to help explain the dilemma in which social work finds itself at a time of environmental crisis. Figure 1 makes it clear that the future relevance of social work depends, at least in part, on incorporation of nature and the natural environment into social work theory and practice. As shown in the literature review, more and more social work publications are incorporating nature / environmental issues, although the overall numbers are still relatively small. If this trend continues then social work will be much better placed to work with individuals and communities in the future.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented the theoretical and conceptual foundation for the thesis. Denzin’s concept of social work in the seventh moment, Bauman’s concept of liquid modernity, and Plumwood’s concept of irrationality as the basis of the ecological crisis form the theoretical foundation for examination of the social context of social work and the effects of modernity upon social work. The place of nature and the environment in social work was considered, and Figure 1 diagrammatically presented the essence of the theoretical positioning of nature and the environmental context for social work practice. The central point of this chapter is the unrealised potential for social workers to theorise nature / social linkages and then incorporate nature and understanding of humanity’s environmental context into understandings of social justice in social work practice.

The research process is the focus of the next chapter, detailing the methodology, underpinning epistemology, and the analytical approach employed.
There is no longer any doubt that climate change globalizes and radicalizes social inequalities inside national contexts and on a global scale...Research must concentrate on the fatal conjunction of poverty, social vulnerability, corruption, the accumulation of dangers and the loss of dignity on a global scale.  

Ulrich Beck (2010 p257)

Chapter 4: The research process

Introduction

This chapter is presented in two parts. In the first part, drawing on the literature review, it recapitulates major gaps in the current body of research on this topic. This section also outlines the research questions and objectives, considers epistemological issues, and discusses the suitability of the research approach for addressing the identified research questions and achieving the objectives of the thesis. The research approach involves an underpinning qualitative framework and employs elements of grounded theory and feminist research methods. Each aspect of the research approach is discussed in turn. The second part of this chapter presents the detail of how the research approach was employed, and outlines the thesis research design. It outlines the scope of the study, sources of primary and secondary data, details about respondents, collection and analysis methods, ethical considerations, and limitations of the research.

Choosing and designing the research process

Rather than employing a dogmatic approach to the primacy of particular research methods, many research methods writers recommend that the combination of the research question(s), the available resources, the research conditions, and principally the type of information required should dictate the choice of approach (Sarantakos 1993; Alston and Bowles 2003; Gergen and Gergen 2000). In other words, the nature of the research project should direct the choice of research method. In the current study, where the research questions relate to an emerging field of inquiry in which little or no empirical study has been reported, the research is necessarily of an exploratory nature and thus requires a research process that will allow for breadth and depth in the study of participants’ beliefs, values and practices, and the range of issues that participants identify as significant. A qualitative approach to the study was the choice in this instance.

The colonising potential of research was an uppermost consideration when I was initially making my choices about a doctoral research topic. Because research can serve as a ‘metaphor for colonial knowledge, for power, and for truth’ (Denzin and Lincoln 2005, p.1), I felt a strong need to choose a topic that was meaningful for me personally, and which would limit the possibilities for
me to have ‘power over’ (Naples 2003 p.18) anyone either during the research process or as a result of the research process. In addition to the qualitative paradigm, feminist research principles served as guiding imperatives in this research, and were appropriate for several reasons. Firstly, feminist sensitivity has been an intrinsic element of my own beliefs and practices for all or most of my adult life, and therefore using feminist research principles as part of this project maintains congruence with my personal belief system, thus facilitating a sense of personal integrity for me in this project.

It should be noted that ‘feminist research’ remains a contested term (Alston and Bowles 2003), and in this instance it provides a perspective rather than a method for the research (Reinharz 1992); a perspective that is highly compatible with the qualitative research paradigm (Ramazanoglu 2002; Olesen 2005). And finally, feminist research principles include assumptions about the dominance of the ruling group, the social construction of knowledge, the impossibility of value-free research, and the effect of social position (Naples 2003; Alston and Bowles 2003; Wendt and Boylan 2008). These assumptions serve to heighten awareness of the researcher to issues of power, and therefore were compatible with my own wish to reduce as far as possible the potential for my research to have a colonising effect on the research participants. Grounded theory was selected to provide the organising principles for the actual collection and analysis of the data, and was used in conjunction with the N-VIVO computer program for the storage and management of data. A grounded approach was chosen because of its compatibility with both the qualitative research paradigm and with social work practice principles, and also because it was not incompatible with feminist research. The grounded approach has been criticised in the past for its positivist premises and assumptions of an objective, external reality, a neutral observer who discovers data, reductionist inquiry of manageable research problems, and objectivist rendering of data (Charmaz and Lincoln 2000; Charmaz 2005). However, grounded theory can be combined with constructivist principles, and it is this approach to the use of grounded theory that was employed in this instance.

The epistemological assumptions of this study are informed by constructionism. Constructionism, unlike positivist or objectivist approaches to knowledge or meaning, considers meaningful reality and truth as not inherent but, rather, derived from individuals through their interactions in the world (Crotty 1998; Padgett 1998; Schwandt and Lincoln 2000). From this perspective, individuals’ experiences and meaning-making systems are relative to their encounters and context (Guba and
The present study considers the individuals’ meaning-making in their own world of experience to be important, and has not attempted to measure this meaning-making up against an ideal of objective reality. This study of social workers’ perceptions of the relevance of nature, which explores various interpretations of reality and truth, may be more usefully understood from the perspective of constructionism as it helps to develop an understanding of how individuals and groups make sense of their own world and experience in it.

The qualitative approach in this study is based on elements of feminist and grounded theory principles and methods. The perspectives represented in this study provide a blend of methods and principles that share recognition of the importance of respectful and collegiate relationships with the research participants, are attuned to the practice principles of social work, and are compatible with the AASW code of ethics. Each methodological perspective will be discussed in turn following an outline of the relevance of the chosen methods, and the significance, aims and objectives of this study.

**Relevance to social work of the chosen research approaches**

The International Association of Social Workers (IAASW) and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) describe one of the main priorities of the social work profession as ‘the liberation of people to enhance wellbeing’ (IAASW-IFSW 2000). Such a focus carries with it a responsibility toward service that is emancipatory, and this responsibility should extend to the arena of social work research (Denzin 2002; Gilgun and Abrams 2002; Strier 2007). In social work research, as in practice, it is not enough to understand – understanding brings with it a call to action, action that will bring about change toward desired positive outcomes.

In this instance, while the IFSW, the AASW, and many other national social work associations have made mention of social workers’ responsibility for understanding environmental issues and impacts as they affect society, there has been no corresponding information for social workers about how to actually do this in their professional role. While this study is not aimed at developing practice models, there is a need to explore the meaning and relevance that social workers attach to environmental matters in order for practice models to be based on the real and lived experiences of social workers.
Significance

The importance of exploring social workers’ ideas about the relevance of the natural environment to their work relates to the importance of the positioning of the profession in a time of deepening social awareness and concern about the environment. Although there has been a developing awareness of the relevance of environmental issues to social work, as evidenced by the slowly growing body of literature on this topic over recent decades, there is scant information based on studies of the experience and perception of social workers. I am not aware of any similar study to this one in Australia. Overseas there have been two studies that address some aspects similar to the current study, and the details of these studies by Narhi (2004) and Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) have been discussed in the literature review chapter.

It is evident from the literature review that there are major gaps in social work research in regard to this topic. Although there is growing interest and acknowledgement within social work about the relevance of the natural world to social work research and practice (Besthorn and Person-McMillen 2002; Coates 2003a, 2003b; Zapf 2009), there is little or no research to inform social workers in their professional capacity about the relevance of the environment and how to incorporate their understandings of the environment into practice. This study will help social work practitioners, educators and researchers to develop an alternative discourse that includes consideration of environmental issues, and will challenge the major conceptualisation by many social workers of nature as irrelevant to their theory and practice domain.

The perceptions of social work practitioners are considered vitally important to this study as it focuses on the challenges and opportunities of developing an environmentally-conscious social work. If the argument is accepted that potential in this field has not yet been realised, then the question of how an environmentally-conscious social work practice can be put into practice is a good starting point for exploration.

Aims and objectives of this study

Flowing from the knowledge gaps identified in the literature review, the aim of this research was to gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which the environment is relevant to social workers. This aim is inextricably linked to the research problem, which identifies the issue that nature and the physical environment has not been adequately conceptualised and theorised in the discipline of social work.
Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

- to ascertain the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of nature and need for environmental content in social work education and practice;
- to explore factors that enable or constrain social workers’ efforts to enact environmental values and issues in practice; and
- to suggest possible strategies for including relevant natural / environmental needs and issues in social work education and practice.

Research questions

The questions that arise from the objectives of this study are:

- what are the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of nature and the environment to their social work practice?
- what are the personal perspectives that inform their views about nature and the environment?
- in what ways, if any, does environmental consciousness affect social workers’ practice?
- what are their views about the effects and implications of an environmentally-conscious social work practice?
- what are the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the concept of social sustainability and its relevance to social work?

In order to address the research questions most fully, a qualitative research framework was chosen. The rationale for this choice is examined in the next section. The rationale offers insight into the epistemological issues and debates that affected the choice of research method, details of the qualitative research framework for the thesis, and the conceptual details for the feminist and grounded theory elements of the study and why they were selected over other potential conceptual influences.

Qualitative research methods

Qualitative research builds theory from the patterns and phenomena identified in the data, and hence represents an inductive approach to research and to theory-building (Alston and Bowles
Although quantitative methods are appropriate to use for certain research projects, either on their own or in a multi-method approach in conjunction with qualitative methods, in this particular instance the lack of prior empirical research on the topic of social workers and the environment and the exploratory nature of the study indicated the appropriateness of the use of qualitative processes. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) 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 and Gergen 2000; Denzin and Lincoln 2005).

The nature of qualitative research as a situated activity recognises that, with the benefit of postmodern and poststructural understandings, there is no clear window into the inner life of an individual. Any understanding that can be gained is filtered through the multiple lenses of social class, language, gender, ethnicity, and race (Denzin and Lincoln 2005). Qualitative research methods, which aim to generate richer and more finely nuanced accounts of human activity (Gergen and Gergen 2000), can be seen as being more faithful to the social world through the generation of the thick description (Geertz 1960) needed to make sense of the complex, fractured, and fragmented puzzle offered through the multiplicity of lenses that construct the social world.

Haraway (1991; 2004a; 2004b; 2004c) argues that scientific methods based in the rationality that has grown out of Enlightenment thinking has resulted in a pretence that scientific methods are value free, non-gendered, and unbiased. The myth underpinning this pretence results in the ‘god-trick’ – the myth of the all-seeing, all-knowing independent and neutral observer who does not affect the social world by their very presence (Haraway 1991 p.189). This argument by Haraway and many others (for example: Naples 2003; Olesen 2005; Gergen and Gergen 2000) exposes the absurdity of conducting social research based on these false assumptions, and alerts us to the value of partial and situated knowledges based on local information and experience, which also respects the researcher’s attempts at honesty about her or his own values and biases, and which values reflexivity on the part of the researcher.

Qualitative research also connects with social work values. Gilgun and Abrams (2002) assert that the connection between qualitative research and social work values is demonstrated through a
commitment to the dignity and worth of all human beings, the alleviation of human suffering, the delivery of quality and competent service, the production of a professional body of knowledge, and to social justice itself.

The overall effect of choosing a qualitative approach to the research recognises that the most that can be expected to be captured in an empirical social research project is a partial, situated and localised range of views about a dynamic and contested issue. Thus, a qualitative approach to the research process is better suited for this particular project, which aims to conduct an in-depth exploration of social work practitioners’ practices, values and viewpoints, while not pretending that the researcher comes to the project as a value-free neutral observer. This approach is augmented by the guiding principles of grounded theory and feminist approaches to social research, as detailed in the next sections.

**Grounded theory methods**

Grounded theory refers to both a method of inquiry and to the product of inquiry. The methods of grounded theory are a set of analytic guidelines that give researchers a focal point for their data collection and to build middle-range theoretical frameworks through successive levels of data analysis and conceptual development (Charmaz and Lincoln 2000, 2005; Glaser 1992, 2002; Strauss and Corbin 1998). In effect, this method involves a continuous process of defining and redefining concepts and relationships between concepts. In this way, the researcher is encouraged to remain close to their studied worlds and to develop an integrated set of theoretical concepts arising out of the empirical materials that not only synthesise and interpret them but also show processual relationships (Strauss 1987; Charmaz 2005). Because the grounded method involves simultaneous data collection and analysis, each informs and focuses the other throughout the research process. The purpose of grounded theory is to generate rather than test theory, and is recommended to be used when the research purpose is the discovery and development of concept definitions and relationships (Gilgun 1994; Glaser 2002).

The stated purposes and processes of grounded theory clearly conform with the stated aims of the current study, which is exploratory and is breaking new empirical ground by exploring the connections between the profession of social work and the environment. The grounded theory approach to research, particularly as it is applied to data collection, has been used considerably in professional fields such as social work, nursing and education, as each seeks to generate and carry out research that is relevant for practice (Charmaz 2005).
Feminist methods and principles

Feminist approaches to social research have, in the past, been described as generally being by women, about women, and for women (Stanley and Wise in Alston and Bowles 2003; Hesse-Biber et al 1999), and have been aimed at revealing the ways in which traditional methods of measuring the world have ignored or silenced women’s viewpoints and position because the researchers literally cannot see them (Olesen 2005; Olesen and Lincoln 2000; Olesen 2008; Diaz 2002). In this instance, the research project, while recognising that social work is a gendered profession that is dominated by women (particularly in the junior ranks), is not necessarily so much about women as it is about the female-dominated profession of social work, and therefore includes men – both as participants and as potential beneficiaries of the research.

The major features of feminist research principles for this study are the focus on postcolonial awareness and practices, and the contribution of standpoint theory to the development of situated knowledges. In this sense, feminist research perspectives are viewed as part of a larger intellectual movement that represents a fundamental shift away from traditional, positivist based social science methods towards recognition that there are many ways to build knowledge (Haraway 2004a, 2004b, 2004c). Feminist research methods have developed as a reaction to past inadequate and inappropriate research methods that have generally been sexist in design, have used all-male samples to generate findings to describe women, or have emphasised value-free science (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). The perspective that feminist sensibilities provide to social research has resulted in the recognition that there is no one way to conduct feminist research. In fact, feminist social research is a dynamically evolving and contested arena wherein different aspects of feminist understanding are highlighted in various approaches to feminist research, such as feminist research by and about specific groups of women, postcolonial feminist research, standpoint theory, and feminist postmodern and deconstructive theory (Olesen 2005).

Although the details of the ethical considerations for this study will be considered more closely in a later section of this chapter, it is the general ethical principles of feminist theory that have contributed most to the feminist aspects of this study. In regard to feminist theory, Denzin and Lincoln (2003) emphasise the intertwined nature of research standards and quality with ethical considerations. In addition to the usual ethical considerations regarding privacy, consent, confidentiality, deceit and deception that are considered by the larger field of social research, feminist research is characterised by trying to avoid harm of any sort to participants, and
emphasises specificity and context and draws on feminist ethics of care (Olesen 2005). Such an approach recognises that issues about conducting open, honest and explicit negotiations around gathering materials, analysis, and presentation are closely linked to issues of how and where knowledge is created, as are the continuing questions of privacy, confidentiality, disclosure, informed consent, and researcher ‘power’. In fact, relationships with participants lie at the heart of feminist ethical concerns (Olesen 2005).

The feminist research principles outlined above influenced my study of social workers and the environment by guiding me in regard to the overall process of the research, through concern with the creation of egalitarian relationships, and through awareness of the need to work collaboratively and meaningfully with participants. Feminist principles have influenced the design and implementation of this study as demonstrated by the inquiry being based in the participants’ beliefs and experiences, and by using semi-structured individual interviews in order to foster a collaborative and meaningful research process.

Collaborative and meaningful relationships with participants were also fostered by considering the interview time to be an interactive and respectful space, albeit a time where the focus was on the participants rather than on me. This resulted in a series of interviews where the researcher and participant were coming together as members of the same profession to create a dialogue to explore the meaning of the topic for the participants, where the interview often took on a conversational character, frequently interspersed with humour. This approach to the participants and the interview format is in marked contrast to other research perspectives, such as those that use a structured interview technique, which emphasise the importance of not getting too involved with the interviewee; not getting involved in long explanations of the study; not deviating from the assigned study introduction, sequence of questions or wording; not giving the respondent any idea of your own personal views; and never improvising during the interview (Fontana and Frey 2000; 2005; 2008).

Feminist principles also affected even the minute detail of organising the interview, so that, for example, participants had a great deal of control over the timing and location of the interview. I made it a habit to get in touch with participants well in advance to check on their availability. We then negotiated a mutually agreeable time and place to meet. In the majority of instances I met with participants at either their home or their workplace. As these were participant’s nominated territorial spaces, it could be expected participants would be far more comfortable there than I would be as an outsider / newcomer to their space. This approach helps to ensure that the issues
of power and control associated with being the researcher are kept to a minimum, and pushes the balance toward the participant rather than the researcher. There were two exceptions to interviewing in the home / workplace of participants. One participant asked to meet me in a café and another participant nominated a park as a meeting place. In both instances, these interviews were in the participants’ local area and took place in locations nominated by the participant.

**Implementation of the research**

This section provides detail of the scope of the study, the participants and their background. After introducing these aspects of the study, there is a discussion of the collection and analysis of materials, followed by the ethical considerations of the study.

**Scope of the study**

This study involved gathering three forms of data. Primary data was gained through interviews with qualified social workers who self-identified as being interested in the environment. There were 20 participants in total, and they were located in NSW, ACT, Queensland and South Australia. As this study attempted to stay close to the participants’ experiences, it is not a critique of the ways in which participants were enacting their environmental concerns, either in their professional or private life, but rather an exploration of participants’ experiences and views on the topic.

Two forms of secondary data were also gathered for this study. One form of secondary data involved the systematic review of four social work national journals, and the method and results of this analysis were already reported in the literature review (chapter two). Another form of secondary data was gathered by systematically reviewing the websites of Australian universities which offer social work courses. This review gives an analysis of environment / sustainability content of social work course curricula, and is reported in detail in chapter eight in conjunction with discussion of participants’ views on social work education. Further detail on the secondary data gathering method is provided later in this chapter.

The next section of this chapter focuses on the research methods associated with the primary data in the form of interviews.
Sampling and recruitment

A non-probability purposive sampling technique was the primary sampling method in this study. This choice was influenced by multiple factors, including: the exploratory goals of the research; the relative lack of research in the area, the use of a grounded theory methodological approach; and the underlying epistemology of the research.

Recruitment of interview participants was initially planned around a passive snowball sampling technique, a method of purposive sampling targeted at a particular group of individuals who are helpful for a particular exploration (Atkinson and Flint 2001). This sampling technique offered a focussed way of entering the field – beginning with one or two social workers whom I knew and had reason to believe had environmental interests in addition to a social work background. The intention was then to ask participants if they might know of social workers in their networks who were interested in environmental issues and might like to be part of this study. The ‘passive’ aspect of the snowball sampling technique then relied on participants passing on my contact information to other potential participants. This technique proved to be a slow and relatively unsuccessful method of recruiting participants, and overall only five of the twenty study participants were recruited in this way.

The recruitment method became more discriminate when I had opportunities to travel to South Australia, south-east Queensland, the ACT, and to the Hunter Valley in NSW. When these opportunities arose, I placed advertisements ahead of time in AASW local branch newsletters, asking for participants who had an interest in both social work and environmental issues. A copy of the advertisement appears at Appendix 2. The same advertisement was also placed in the Victorian branch newsletter, however there were no responses and the study therefore had no participants who resided in Victoria. The interviews were undertaken in the period 2004-2005.

For the purposes of this study, any participant who was a social worker and also had an interest in the environment was eligible to participate. Focussing on recruitment of social work participants who self-identified as interested in the environment was considered to give the best chance of exploring the research questions, as this group would be the most likely to have considered some of the issues – at least in passing. Although there are some workers around Australia who are known as social workers who are not necessarily qualified in a way that makes them eligible for membership of the Australian Association of Social Workers, I was not contacted by anyone in this
category who wished to take part in this study. In the end, to my knowledge all participants had qualifications that fulfil the eligibility requirements of the AASW.

From the beginning I was aiming to recruit at least twenty participants for this study: a number large enough to generate rich and detailed data, but small enough to allow thorough analysis of the data. By the time I needed to draw the data collection phase to a conclusion, twenty social workers had volunteered as participants in the study, and I met and interviewed them all. A further two social workers contacted me at a later date to volunteer to be in the study. At this point I did not re-open data collection through interview, as initial analysis had already revealed that ‘saturation point’ had been reached. This process ensured compliance with grounded research principles, which considers that enough data has been collected once ‘saturation point’ has been reached – that is, when no new properties, dimensions, conditions, actions / inactions, or consequences are seen in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1998 p.136).

Although there is always potential to find something new in the data, saturation is the point at which collecting additional data seems counterproductive; and where the ‘new’ that is uncovered does not add much more to the explanation at the time (Strauss and Corbin 1998). In this instance, the initial N-VIVO coding process revealed no new ‘free’ nodes after the fourteenth interview. This process indicated such consistency to the expressed views of participants that the value of conducting further interviews for the purpose of this study was judged to be marginal. This consistency also led to the view that any further theoretical sampling would not be needed as there were no new emergent concepts (Strauss and Corbin 1998), possibly explained by the newness of this topic to social workers, and the ‘marginality’ of the topic to the professional arena.

**The interviews**

Interviewing is a very commonly used research process, particularly in the field of qualitative research and, as Fontana and Frey (2000) emphasise, it is also one of the most powerful ways in which we try to understand human beings. Interviewing is not a value-neutral or independent exercise and is best understood as an activity that is ‘inextricably and unavoidably historically, politically, and contextually bound’ (Fontana and Frey 2005, p.695).

In accordance with the feminist constructivist epistemology that underpinned my approach to this research, the selection of the interview process for the gathering of empirical data was viewed
from the outset as an opportunity to develop negotiated and contextually-based results. As opposed to the possibility of viewing the interview as a temporally-limited exercise in gaining a true and accurate instantiation of respondents’ selves and lives, the interview in this instance represented an attempt to obtain a rich, experiential account of participants’ views on the topic at hand.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen in order to reflect the way(s) in which the researcher and the participant were in a relationship, and also because I was trying to understand potentially complex views and behaviours without imposing any a priori categorisation that might limit my field of inquiry, which is the effect that a more structured interview format might have (Padgett 1998; Fontana and Frey 2000; Bechhofer and Paterson 2000). The information that I sought would not have been available from any text that I knew of, thus preventing the use of textual analysis to gain the information, and nor could it be gained by observation due to the nature of social work as a confidential and client-based activity. Focus groups may have provided another possible forum for discussing these issues and gaining the information I sought; however as the field is so new and exploratory it did not appear feasible to be able to gather more than one or two people in the same place at the one time for this purpose.

Although I entered the field with a list of topic areas that I wished to ensure I did not forget, the interview was framed overall as an active and emergent, though goal-directed, process (Padgett 1998). Such a process involves rapport building with each participant through showing genuine interest in participants’ life and work interests, and by being open to self-disclosure where it seemed the right thing to do. Although several qualitative research authors suggest a judicious “joining” with one’s informants’ (sic), which can facilitate disclosure and make an interview more conversational and free flowing (Padgett 1998 p.60; Douglas in Fontana and Frey 2005, p.696), my approach was not aimed at using a technique to persuade the participant to reveal more about her/himself. Rather, I viewed it as an empathetic approach to another person who had a different, though equal, role to my own. This was a partnership approach whereby both researcher and participant had an interest in having a conversation about social work and its domain as that domain relates to the environment and the people with whom social workers work.

The application of the above-described approach to conducting this research resulted in interviews that ranged between thirty-five minutes and three hours long, and were, on average, one-and-a-half hours each. Most contained quite a lot of repartee and laughter. In some of the
interviews I revealed quite a bit about myself and what I was trying to achieve through this research. However, I was also conscientiously trying to not ‘lead’ the participants in any of their answers, so I would often gently try to seek the participant’s views before answering their questions about what I thought on the topic. A particular example of this phenomena was my question about ‘social sustainability’, which was often met with a quizzical look, and several participants said they’d never heard of it before asking me what I meant by the term. In some instances I responded by simply asking what s/he would mean if s/he used the term ‘sustainability’, and then what would it mean if they added ‘social’ to the equation. After exploring these ideas with the participant, I would then usually return to her/his question about what I meant by ‘social sustainability’ to tell the participant some ideas I have about what it might mean and how the concept might be relevant to social work. Through this approach I hoped to demonstrate that I was prepared to give, rather than only to receive, and to practice the partnership values that I espoused for the interview process.

A semi-structured interview format was also chosen because the interview is a basic social work method, albeit that a different approach is needed for research than in a typical social work setting (Padgett 1998). The interview format is a technique that not only I, as the researcher, was comfortable with, but as the participants were all social workers themselves, it was also a format with which they were very familiar.

All of the interview questions reflect the research questions, and were grouped into the following four areas:

- current role, practice style, theory base;
- views about the environment and its relevance to practice;
- ideological influences, particularly feminist influences, and their relevance to practice; and
- future directions (AASW role, social work education and curriculum).

**The interview process**

The semi-structured interview process allows for wide variation in the wording of questions, for further exploration of issues that arise, and in the time taken to conduct the interview. For these reasons, there was no specific pilot phase for the study, however I did make one change to the question topics as a result of the very first interview. The issue of social work education had
arisen, which I had not specifically included already, but which I recognised as a very important issue – one that invited participants to speculate about the future of social work and the ways in which future generations of social workers should be educated. Following the first interview and the inclusion of the education issue, I found that the topics I had drafted were sufficiently wide-ranging to enable me to focus on areas of specific interest for the participants while still covering all the areas of interest that I had identified.

All of the individual interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed for the purpose of a grounded theory analysis. Each participant was offered an information sheet and a consent form prior to the start of the interview, and no recording was started until the participant had read the information sheet to their satisfaction and signed the consent form. At the end of each interview, participants were invited to contact me if they had any further thoughts on the topic that they wanted to be included as part of their interview, but none made further contact for this purpose. One participant did send me an email six months after the interview, inquiring about the progress of my PhD.

The interview questions were not given to the participants in writing – rather, I tried to lead the participants through the various topics in a more conversational manner, occasionally checking my list during the interview to ensure I’d covered the topic range. Many of the participants commented that they didn’t think they’d have so much to say about the environment as it relates to social work, and had assumed the interview wouldn’t take anywhere near as long as the hour and a half I’d booked with them. As one participant said ‘I thought this interview would be over in a few minutes because I didn’t think I’d have much to say, but this has been really interesting and I realise I need to think about it a bit more’ (Participant: Lucy). I took such comments from participants to mean that they saw their interest in the environment as something they hadn’t thought much about in relation to their professional practice, and didn’t expect that they would have much to say on the topic.

**Secondary materials**

Two forms of secondary materials were collected. Firstly, university social work course outlines from within Australia were collected. The purpose of gathering this form of materials was to draw conclusions about the extent to which environmental and/or sustainability issues are already included in social work courses in Australia. The other form of secondary materials was gained through searching the databases of the Australian, British, Canadian and USA national social work
association journals, the results of which were already reported in chapter two. The purpose of gathering these materials was to examine the extent of comparable national social work association publications on environmental / ecological / sustainability issues. The collection method and rationale for the review of university social work course outlines is presented next.

**Australian social work course outlines**

As at November 2010, there were 26 universities in Australia that offer social work courses accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers. The relevant universities are listed in the following table:

**Table 2: Accredited Australian social work courses**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State / Territory</th>
<th>Relevant Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>University of New England; University of New South Wales; University of Newcastle; University of Sydney; Charles Sturt University; University of Western Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Deakin University; Monash University; La Trobe University; Victoria University; University of Melbourne; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>James Cook University; Central Queensland University; Queensland University of Technology; University of the Sunshine Coast; University of Queensland; Griffith University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>Edith Cowan University; University of Western Australia; Curtin University of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>Flinders University; University of South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>Charles Darwin University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>University of Tasmania</td>
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<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Australian Catholic University</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

NB: The Australian National University does offer a double degree that includes a social work qualification, however the social work component is taught by the Australian Catholic University – information captured already in the above table.

The course outlines for accredited social work courses were obtained from each university’s website, together with subject descriptions where publicly available. Subject descriptions were available on the websites of nineteen of the 26 universities. Subject names and descriptions were scrutinised for any mention or form of words to do with environment / ecology / sustainability.

It is possible that environmental / sustainability issues are discussed in lectures and tutorials without necessarily being mentioned in official subject names or descriptions. However, since
public descriptions of social work courses are texts that inform the discourse which dictates the issues and topics that are of legitimate interest for social work, it was considered that the publicly available descriptions of courses / subjects are important statements in and of themselves.

Qualitative analysis of collected materials

The analysis of the research data was organised around elements of a grounded theory investigation of the interview data, which uncovered a high degree of corroboration among the participants in their views about social justice and environmental justice and the relevance of the environment to social work practice. The secondary materials were analysed via a simple count method.

Grounded theory analysis

Grounded theory is theory that is derived from data, systematically gathered and analysed through the research process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). The systematic gathering of the data through twenty taped and transcribed semi-structured interviews has already been described. In this section the focus will be on describing the process of analysis of the data.

The first step in this approach is the coding of each piece of datum which, while being a micro-analysis of the information, is also meant to be conducted in a free-flowing and creative process (Strauss and Corbin 1998). There are two major aspects to the analysis: firstly, the data – that is, the participants’ recounting of actual events, observations or views; and secondly, the researcher’s interpretation of those events, observations or views (Charmaz and Lincoln 2000; 2005). There is also an interplay that takes place between the data and the researcher in the process of gathering and analysing data (Glaser 2002). Coding can therefore be seen as a simultaneous process in conjunction with data analysis. The initial coding phase in grounded theory is the point at which the researcher begins to define the action in the data statement (Charmaz 2005), and focuses on a line-by-line action definition, explication of implicit assumptions, and on seeing the processes at work (Glaser 2002).

In this instance, after the transcripts were returned by the transcribers and I had been though the process of re-listening to the tapes and correcting any mistakes in the transcript, I coded each transcript line-by-line. This is the initial ‘open-coding’ process of grounded theory, wherein data are broken down into discrete parts, closely examined, and compared for similarities and differences (Strauss and Corbin 1998). I conducted this process in N-VIVO - a computer program
developed specifically for the electronic management of qualitative research data (Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge 2006; Bazeley 2007). The N-VIVO process at this stage involves several elements. While each interview is coded according to ‘free nodes’ (labels that indicate attach a meaning or categorisation to the data by the researcher), there are also additional aspects to the program that overlap with the later coding stages. During coding, N-VIVO allows annotations to be written about any aspect of a particular transcript; a memo page allows the researcher to write down any overall thoughts, developmental ideas, potential connections in the data, possible explanations; and a drawing component allows maps to be drawn, so that diagrammatic representations of connections can be shown within a particular transcript and between transcripts. In this way the grounded theory coding and analysis interplay is facilitated through the N-VIVO program at all stages (Bringer, Johnston and Brackenridge 2004; Bazeley 2007).

In practice, I found that the annotation and memo functions allowed me to keep a record of any discrepancies or convergences that I noticed, particularly in regard to participant responses, and questions and observations that arose from the analysis. I also considered it advantageous that all of these records were in the one computer program, allowing me to check records of my previous thoughts and questions, which, coupled with the ‘query’ function in N-VIVO, gave quick access to comparative data.

The next step in the coding process is to conduct selective coding, which I began after the open coding of the first transcript. This process moved quickly into axial coding as the ‘axis’ of each of the categories began to emerge (Strauss and Corbin 1998). This progression was facilitated by the N-VIVO program, which allows the ‘free nodes’ identified in the open coding process to be grouped into ‘tree nodes’. I found an added feature of N-VIVO over paper-based coding is that any particular word, phrase, line or paragraph can be coded according to multiple nodes. Having identified the tree nodes, or axial codes, at a very early stage, I was then able to code later transcripts directly into tree nodes. At the same time, I was still able to code any new information that did not ‘fit’ my tree node categories as free nodes. I found that no new free nodes emerged after the fourteenth interview, and can thus be described as the ‘saturation point’ sought as part of the grounded process (Strauss and Corbin 1998).

As the analysis continued, the categories were continuously compared with one another and with any new emerging data in order to notice links between the categories. In this way, data were compared with data, data were then compared with categories, and categories were then
compared with other categories (Charmaz 2005). This process calls for abstract conceptualisation – through applying my own conceptualisation to the actual words of participants - and is the first step in theory-building (Strauss and Corbin 1998; Glaser 2002). An example of this process occurred in the labelling of what I came to call the ‘world view’ category. Participants described a variety of characteristics of themselves that I firstly categorised into ‘ideology / politics / spirituality / self-big picture’. I came to realise that these various attributes and views were parts of what I would call a world view – that is, the framework of ideas and beliefs through which each of the participants interprets their world and interacts in it. These categories included such concepts as feminism, social justice, spirituality, and political viewpoint.

As the links between categories were built, theory began to emerge around core categories. Many convergences emerged between participants’ expressed views, demonstrating a high degree of corroboration around some of the concepts. These convergences, once grouped, became the basis for the major themes and these are presented in the findings, chapters five to eight. Using these elements of the grounded approach to data collection and analysis allowed me to develop theories about participants’ lived experiences and their ideas about the relevance of nature and the broad environmental context to social work.

The overall grounded theory process may be viewed as an interpretive process and has to some extent been criticised as being overly interpretive (Hammersley 1992). However, by employing peer-checking of the initial codes and ongoing analysis, some of the subjectivity of isolated analysis is kept to a minimum (Miles and Huberman 1994; Padgett 1998). For the present study, peer-checking involved allowing supervisors to check my analysis of the data (Charmaz 2003, 2005). Also, developing analytic memos (Strauss and Corbin 1998) from the beginning of the interview process and throughout the coding process helped to keep track of developing ideas which were then shared with my supervisor. These memos became part of the data collection and analysis and have assisted in the final writing up of the study. ‘Throughout the whole process, induction, deduction and verification is continuously occurring’ (Alston and Bowles 2003 p.208).

**Rigour in qualitative research**

The mentoring relationship between the student and the supervisor is integral to the enhancement of rigour in a qualitative study (Shelby 2000). The concept of rigour denotes the extent to which findings from a qualitative study pose credible interpretations and genuinely represent what has been studied (Guba and Lincoln 2005, 2008; Padgett 1998). In the field of
Many researchers have rejected the positivist terminology ascribing rigour in reports of quantitative research (Kvale 1995; Lincoln 1995; Alston and Bowles 2003; Denzin and Lincoln 2008). A concept that has become a more appropriate approach to rigour in qualitative research is the concept of trustworthiness (Guba and Lincoln 2005; Padgett 1998), which has been extensively explored in regard to feminist research (Olesen 2005). For the present study, trustworthiness has been enhanced by the various strategies reported in this chapter, such as: in-depth interviewing; supervisory mentoring of the research process and especially the coding; the construction of an appropriate methodology; the use of a grounded approach to data collection and analysis; and an audit trail which, through the use of N-Vivo, enhanced the openness, transparency and accountability of data management and analysis. Seale and Silverman (1997) highlight aspects of rigour in relation to the presentation of findings, noting the importance of ensuring a representation of cases and of supporting generalisation with evidence (in this case quotes from participants), which are also present in the current study.

Padgett (1998) has noted that member checking, a useful process for ensuring trustworthiness, can in some cases be difficult to conduct because of geographic distances and the cost involved, which was the case with the present study. Although participants in this study were offered the option of further contact, none took up this offer. However, my own and the participants’ shared experience of social work practice and education helped me to understand participants’ meaning and so enhanced trustworthiness. In addition, the use of high-quality audio recording of the interviews made transcribing verbatim relatively straightforward. This is not seen as a substitute for participants’ reflections, but it did enhance the quality and therefore the accuracy of the audio captured during the interviews. Member checking with all participants would have further enhanced the study in regard to rigour; nevertheless, as Padgett (1998 p.101) points out, ‘we make do with what we have’.

Apart from constructing appropriate methods to enhance rigour, there were some ethical considerations and challenges presented by this study of social workers and the environment.

**Ethical considerations**

This study was given approval by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee. This process involved providing the Committee with extensive information about the nature of the research and any anticipated risks to participants. The Committee also required development of an information form and a consent form for participants, as well as a draft of the
questions for the semi-structured interviews prior to beginning the study. Consent was given by the Committee, although a later change was sought by me in regard to the change away from a snowball technique for the recruitment of participants. I sent to the Committee a copy of the advertisement I wished to place in social work newsletters for the recruitment of participants, and this change was approved. A copy of the Consent form can be viewed at Appendix 3, and the Information sheet at Appendix 4.

At the ethics approval request stage I did not anticipate that the interviews would be a cause of distress for participants, and hence did not expect that any particular support mechanisms would need to be put in place – keeping in mind that the majority of social workers have professional support mechanisms already in place for the ongoing review of their practice. The subject matter of the research was not likely to involve the recall of distressing events. As it happened, I did not perceive any signs of distress in any of the participants during the interviews. I left my telephone number and email contact details with all participants in case of delayed reaction, but none contacted me in this regard. In every instance, the taping of the interview did not start until such time as the participant had read the information sheet and signed the consent form, and agreed that taping could go ahead.

All materials related to the interviews were kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office at Charles Sturt University, as they will be until the elapse of seven years, in line with study verification procedures. There were four typists involved in the transcribing of the taped interviews, and each signed a Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement. A copy of this Agreement can be viewed at Appendix 5.

Presentation of the interview materials of this study has also been given consideration in regard to ethics. All participants in this study have been given pseudonyms (Fontana and Frey 2008). All quotations are presented verbatim. Where I have deleted words I have inserted an ellipsis. Words or letters I have added for clarity, or commitment to the participants’ anonymity, are presented in square brackets.

Limitations of the research

As a study limited to interviews with twenty 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 struggle with questions
around the relevance of nature and the physical environment 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;
- the study participants all resided and worked within only four states / territories: New South Wales, South Australia, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory; and
- some of the recruitment for the study relied on notices in AASW newsletters, which could represent a bias toward views of members of the AASW. This may or may not reflect the wider situation, as not all practising social workers are members of the AASW. It should be noted, though, that some participants were told about the advertisement by friends / colleagues who received the newsletter, and weren’t necessarily members themselves.

**Researcher bias**

The question of researcher bias arises in the process of any research project. As discussed in the earlier part of this chapter, feminist research principles underline a key theme: that research is not an unbiased or value-free exercise (Olesen 2005). Rather, it is important to be clear about the potential biases of the researcher, thus acknowledging the limitations of the project and making the decision-making process of the research project more transparent. In fact, as Diaz (2002 p.51) points out: ‘Data only makes sense in a given frame of knowledge. Knowledge is the product of a history of distinctions made in a process of observing’. Declared personal biases can therefore aid the reader in further evaluation of the researcher’s work and findings.

In this case, there are many assumptions and values that I bring to the study process that could potentially affect the project through researcher bias. This particular project is one that is dear to me on a personal level, and I bring to it my background as a social, political and environmental activist. In addition, as a white person who works as a social work academic, I carry with me a relatively privileged social position. I am very aware that the number of people in the world who are in a position to focus on research into a field about which they feel passionate is very limited, and I am also aware that it is a rare privilege to be able to combine one’s work and personal interests.
My personal and professional values, which I believe to be congruent, also have the potential to influence the research. My life as a social worker and as an activist is based in my beliefs about the inherent worth of the individual and the value of social and community wellbeing, which is in turn informed by my unerring belief that a valued and unpolluted natural environment is essential to ongoing life on this planet. In other words, I feel quite sure that ongoing social and economic activity are dependent on a healthy environment, and that to carry on as usual while a range of bio-systems are depleted and the atmosphere is heating up through global warming is equivalent to re-arranging the deckchairs on the Titanic.

In line with my social work values of social justice and equity, I am concerned about the ways in which environmental degradation are impacting most severely on people who are amongst the most vulnerable in the world. Environmental impacts are not equitable, and it is clear to me that it is the world’s poorest and most marginalised people who are suffering most from the negative impacts of pollution, global warming, and habitat destruction, and are bearing these impacts on behalf of the economies of industrialised nations. Thus, people in wealthy nations are benefiting economically from the negative environmental impacts being experienced by poorer nations, and wealthier people in industrialised nations are benefiting disproportionately in comparison to people living in poverty within wealthier nations.

My personal view is that it is too late to rely on the development of technological solutions to the environmental crisis with which we are faced: it is time for social workers to be part of a movement that helps to bring about a change in values away from Western consumerism and materialism toward a simpler, cooperatively-based, sustainable way of life. I see social workers overall as having a professional identity and education based on expertise in matters social. This makes social workers potentially a very important part of the move toward a more sustainable way of life, one that is more aware of the value of nature and respect for natural systems.

In my view, the education that social workers receive in Australia, together with social work’s professional identity as represented by the AASW’s journal, Australian Social Work, does not adequately prepare or encourage social workers to consider issues pertaining to the natural environment or questions of sustainability.

The process of conducting the research can be affected by researcher bias through consequences such as: selective observation and selective recording of the information; allowing one’s personal
views and perspectives to affect how data are interpreted and how the research is conducted (Johnson 1997). The reflexive process of engaging in critical self-reflection to identify one’s own potential biases and predispositions, however, also enables the researcher to monitor and attempt to control their biases (Johnson 1997). Feminist research principles, while accepting that researcher bias cannot be totally eliminated, do not call for an unfettered approach to this issue. Accordingly, I made an effort in the research process to monitor and control my own biases by: changing from a snowball recruitment technique to an advertising strategy when it became obvious that snowballing would be too slow; accepting social workers who responded to my advertisement for participation in the study on a first-come, first-serve basis; not discussing my views unless participants asked, and even then only after participants had the opportunity to discuss their own views; and tape-recording every interview in full and then doing a line-by-line coding from the transcript. Through these techniques I have attempted to reduce my personal influence on participants and on the study process as much as I was able, while recognising that my own situated and partial knowledges cannot be completely erased in terms of their impact on the study. To claim that the study was completely objective would make me, in Haraway’s (1991, p.189) words, guilty of an attempt at the ‘god-trick’. No doubt my own biases and analytical skills have affected the analysis by influencing the decision-making process throughout, and by selectively recognising significant relationships between and amongst the data.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has presented detail of the research process involved in undertaking this study, as well as the rationale for the choices of method and process. Through outlining the significance, aims and objectives, the research questions and the various qualitative methods used for collecting and analysing data, this chapter has attempted to demonstrate a rigorous research process that addresses the initial research problem. I argued that the lack of any similar empirical study calls for an exploratory approach to the study, and therefore a qualitative approach was the obvious choice. Elements of grounded theory and feminist research methods provided the guiding principles for the study, and N-Vivo software was used to manage the information provided by participants in interviews.

The following four chapters present the main themes and arguments that emerged from the analysis. The next chapter begins with an overview of basic demographic information about the participants who self-selected for this study. This chapter and the next three all begin with a
presentation of data, and each includes a discussion section that uses both data and theory to locate the significant problems and questions raised by the data.
The post-war modernization narrative presupposes the separation between ‘natural’ and ‘societal’ forces...but climate change actually demonstrates and enforces exactly the opposite, namely an ongoing extension and deepening of combinations, confusions and ‘mixtures’ of nature and society. It makes a mockery of the premise that society and nature are separate and mutually exclusive.

Ulrich Beck (2010 p256)

Chapter 5: Sustainability: the connectedness and the brokenness

Introduction

This chapter begins with an overview of demographic information about the participants, then reports and discusses participants’ histories of awareness of the environment and environmental issues. It explores the formation process for the development of participants’ views about nature and the environmental context of practice and relates to the research question ‘What are the personal perspectives that inform participants’ views about nature and the physical environment?’

The main themes in this chapter include participants’ past and current relationships with nature / environment; the context for participants’ concerns about the environment; and sustainability. Participants’ express an overall concern with wholism, and many participants use words such as ‘wholistic’ and ‘whole’ in response to all aspects of the study. Nevertheless, participant responses in regard to sustainability did fall into groupings that can be identified as: physical aspects; social aspects; workplace issues; and possible solutions.

Participants’ theoretical perspectives and world views refer to the most abstract level of knowledge, and include assumptions about relationships of people, society and the natural world (Coates 2003a). In addition, world views can be expected to contain a ‘vision of what a person thinks society should look like’ and provide justification for individuals’ action (Coates 2003a p.45).

The participants

The following Table (No. 3) outlines basic demographic characteristics of the participants in this study.
Table 3: Summary of participants by name, sex, age and occupation / field of practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Occupation/ field of practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Keisha</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Family law mediator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Claire</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>Group facilitator / counsellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Melanie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>Retired academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ruby</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Academic / Trainer/ Community worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gayle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Academic/ Community Health social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tegan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>Mental Health social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>Hospital social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Marti</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>Health Service Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Social Worker (aged care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Mental health social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lucy</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Senior social worker(community health)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Taylor</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>Youthworker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Harriet</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Social Worker (aged care)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>Mental Health social worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shana</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>Child Protection Training &amp; Education Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Athena</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Child Protection counsellor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tilly</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>Manager Community Legal Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Larry</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Retired Executive (Justice portfolio)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>Social Worker (youth policy)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants in this study had an age range from twenty-nine to seventy years, with an average age of 43.7 years. Eighteen of the twenty participants were female, reflecting the overall gender distribution of social workers in Australia (ABS 2006).

Most participants live and work in NSW (17), while two live and work in South Australia, and one lives and works in Queensland. The two participants who are retired from full-time work both do some part-time work.

Eleven participants gained their undergraduate social work degree in NSW. Four participants gained their BSW in South Australian universities, two gained their BSW from Victorian universities, one gained her/his BSW from Queensland University, and two gained their undergraduate social work qualification at overseas institutions. This information is presented below in Table 4.
Table 4: Location at which participants completed their undergraduate degree

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Location of undergraduate degree</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSW (includes USyd (5), CSU (2), UNewcastle (4))</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia (includes Flinders (1), UAdelaide (1), and USouth Australia (2))</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria (includes UMelbourne (1), La Trobe (1))</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland (UQueensland)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas (Both UK – UBradford (1), UNewcastle (1))</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition to their social work degree, sixteen of the twenty participants had at least one other undergraduate or postgraduate qualification. These qualifications ranged from graduate diploma, through to Masters and PhD. Five participants had a Bachelor of Arts in addition to their social work degree. Seven participants had a Masters degree, two of which were a Master of Social Work, one a Master of Social Welfare, one a Master of Community Health, one a Master of Education, and one Master of Business. One participant had two Master’s degrees – one in legal studies, as well as a Master of Arts (women’s studies).

Six participants are currently studying for higher degrees, and are enrolled in the following courses: Master of Couples Counselling, Master of Social Work, Master of Counselling, Master of Art Therapy, PhD (Geography), and Master of Professional Studies (Peace Studies).

In terms of ethnicity and culture, half of participants (10) identified as Anglo-Australian, both ethnically and culturally. Other ethnic backgrounds identified by participants were: German, Macedonian, Jewish, English, and Irish. Other cultural affiliations identified by participants were: German, Green, Irish, Woman / Lesbian, Scottish, Australian, and ‘unsure’ (1).

Eight participants identified as having no religious affiliation, five identified as Anglican, four identified as Christian, while one each of the participants identified as Quaker, Pagan, and Eclectic. This information is represented below in Table 5.

Table 5: Participants’ religious affiliations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religious Affiliation</th>
<th>Number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nil</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overall, participants were members of 60 community and professional organisations, such as the AASW, unions, sporting and cultural associations, environmental / conservation, animal welfare organisations, and church groups. Only one participant had no memberships of any organisations. On average, each participant belonged to three community and professional organisations. The five participants who identified as belonging to a political party were all members of the Greens. Participant memberships are outlined in Table 6 below.

Table 6 Participants’ membership of community and professional organisations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of community / professional organisation</th>
<th>Number of participants (some nominated in more than one category)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professional representative bodies (e.g., AASW, AASWWE, TASA)</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental activist group (e.g., ACF, Wilderness Society, Greenpeace)</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights / Peace groups (e.g., Amnesty International, People for Peace)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation/ land management group (e.g., Landcare, National Parks Association, plant growing groups)</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Political party (Greens only)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church / spiritual groups/ (e.g., Church Fellowship, Anthroposophical Society)</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Volunteer coordination groups (mentoring, SES, Rotary)</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sporting /fitness groups (Yoga Association, Bicycles NSW)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendly Societies / Co-operatives</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Aid organisations (e.g., UNICEF, Community Aid Abroad)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Trade Union</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art / Cultural groups (e.g., choir, art group)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animal rights (Animal Liberation)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>60</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants were asked to identify any activism in which they are currently involved, or had been in the past. This information is not easily quantifiable as participants gave responses such as ‘numerous marches and protests’, however an attempt has been made in Table 7 to categorise the kinds of activism identified by participants.
Overall, the participants comprised a varied range of age, practice experience, and geographic locations. Participants‘ years of practice experience since graduating as a social worker ranged from over 40 years to less than three years, and three of the participants came to social work study as mature-age learners – after working in other positions such as nursing and welfare officer. None of the participants identified as Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander, and two were from non-English speaking backgrounds – both European. All of the participants have an undergraduate degree in social work / social administration.

Two of the participants have retired from the paid workforce and the other eighteen participants work in various settings such as hospitals, community health centres, women’s / community support and counselling services, community legal centres, state government policy branches, and educational settings. The majority of participants were involved in direct social work practice where they worked with individuals, couples and families.

Two of the participants had less than three years experience in social work practice since graduating with their social work qualification, and two of the participants were retired social workers who each had more than thirty years experience as social workers. The remaining sixteen participants had between four years and twenty years of social work practice experience, and on average the participants had 12.7 years of social work practice experience. Of the 18 currently employed participants, 15 indicated that they work full-time, and three indicated that they work part-time.
The environment

Participants had varying ideas about ‘the environment’ and about what it is they speak of when they speak about ‘the environment’. For many, notions of ‘the environment’ were bound up with their relationship with and to the environment. Some had been concerned about the environment and about environmentally-related issues since childhood/teenage years, whereas others had developed such concerns and interests as adults – some even quite recently. Since participants did not define, as such, what they meant by ‘the environment’, it is important to understand the ways in which participants describe their relationship with the environment and the development of their interests and concerns.

Table 8 lists participants according to whether they ascribed themselves as having developed their interest in the environment during childhood/teenage years, or in adult life. Eleven participants, or slightly more than half, described themselves as having been interested in the environment since their younger years.

**Table 8: Early / later development of participants’ environmental interests**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants interested in the environment since childhood / teenage years</th>
<th>Participants who developed environmental interests in adult life</th>
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<td>Ruby</td>
<td>Tegan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Brenda</td>
<td>Athena</td>
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<td>Claire</td>
<td>Harriet</td>
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<td>Larry</td>
<td>Lucy</td>
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<td>Marti</td>
<td>Freya</td>
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<td>Keisha</td>
<td>Melanie</td>
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<td>Nadia</td>
<td>Stella</td>
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<td>Sam</td>
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<td>Ella</td>
<td>Shana</td>
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<td>Tilly</td>
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Participants who described themselves as having strong childhood interests in nature and the broad environment typically had parents/grandparents who had actively encouraged their childhood interest. Ruby, Brenda and Larry typify the experiences of participants who had strong family influences on their environmental views and experiences, beginning in childhood.

Ruby’s family has long had an environmental focus, and that is even still developing now:
(Ruby) I’ve had a connection with environmental issues for a long time, and it probably goes back to my childhood. I don’t know where it originated, but my whole family is very interested in country and land and ecological issues – they’ve become much more interested as we’ve all evolved. So I’d say my father, for example, is quite pragmatic, quite environmental. I’d say he’s very green, and he has been attacked for being green.

Brenda also is typical of participants whose interest began very early:

(Brenda) I think some of it’s to do with my upbringing. I often give thanks and am immensely grateful for my parents, because, from the earliest age I can remember, I was introduced to nature and creatures.

Larry recognises an intergenerational link, and credits his grandparents with influencing his attitude to nature:

(Larry) It’s been a whole of life thing. It has certainly been with my family. I’m the fifth generation in this environment, so this is very much part of my family and it was translated down. My father was very environmentally orientated, and my mother was always very ‘at home’ in nature but never pushed it strongly but it was always there. The people who influenced me most of all would have been my maternal grandmother and grandfather, who simply adored this environment. They drove it into me very strongly, from a child right up to... my grandmother died when she was in her nineties, and she still used to take me for walks and teach me – a bit like the Aboriginal thing – how important [it was]. She talked about the importance of the environment and how we had to be careful with it.

Participants who described a strong relationship with nature since childhood didn’t necessarily remember any particular adult influence on their relationship with nature in their younger years. Rather, some indicated a broader influence that came from the environment itself, or other social influences. Claire and Keisha exemplify this type of experience.

(Claire) I feel quite strongly identified with my physical environment that I grew up in. I grew up in the country...It probably just comes from that link of that childhood through into my adult perceptions.

(Keisha) I grew up in a bushland suburb, so I grew up in the bush with a whole bunch of kids who spent their lives in the bush.

Of the participants who developed environmental interests during their teenage years, some described a more self-directed response to things they were seeing and hearing at the time. Taylor and Tilly, for example, remember their parents as quite disinterested in the environment.

(Taylor) My parents weren’t very interested in the environment. My second oldest brother sparked up an interest in me – in Indigenous issues, women’s’
issues and environmental issues when I was about fifteen or sixteen. I don’t know how much he believed, but I believed him and that affected me.

(Tilly) I remember being about eleven or twelve and writing my first letter to a politician. I grew up in a conservative environment where the environment really wasn’t part of my family. My family, my parents, weren’t political, still aren’t political, in the sense that they don’t get involved, they don’t even talk about it really.

Participants whose environmental interests had been with them since childhood tended to describe much more engagement with ‘nature’ in life now – for example, by regularly spending time in relatively unmodified environments where they felt they could observe flora and fauna in ‘unspoiled’ habitats. Participants who live in urban settings and lead what might be described as an ‘urban lifestyle’ display a high degree of environmental awareness without necessarily having any regular connection to ‘nature’.

Tegan, for example, says she was unaffected by ‘environmentalism’ until, as an adult, she happened to move into a share-house situation, wherein the entire household was already established as an environmentally aware place. This turned out to be a consciousness-raising experience for Tegan, who said ‘I think it’s not like I changed, but I just wasn’t aware’. Since then, Tegan has maintained a lifestyle of relative voluntary simplicity by, for example, choosing to rely on public transport and her bicycle rather than buy a car.

Participants who developed their environmental interests / concerns as adults, described a more developing awareness of a range of issues that gradually became more and more a concern for them. For some, their interest was not sparked until after having children of their own, and it was concern for the next generation that gave them a sense of urgency about preserving some sort of unspoiled environmental heritage. The concept of intergenerational responsibility and planning is central to the findings of the WCED (1987 p.43), which defined sustainable development as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’.

Current relationship with the environment

Participants described a variety of ways in which the environment is important in their lives now. For some, nature has an intrinsic value that may or may not be combined with the instrumental value nature provides. Nadia, for example, expresses a combination of both intrinsic and instrumental values in nature when she says ‘For me, I need to see greenery to feel good and
happy’. In addition, Nadia says that many of her extended family’s celebratory events are held at places like parks and beaches, so the availability of clean and safe outdoor areas is very important to her. Nadia adds: ‘As a society we need to meet, and where we meet is important’. Nadia is not necessarily referring to wild, unmodified environments - rather, for her the importance of the outdoor places she wants to have available are places that her family can ‘go to and play in and roll in and have parties in and those kinds of things’. It appears that, for Nadia, her main concern is for the environment as a socially-constructed space that facilitates human contact and interaction. This is a view that values the environment, but which sees the environmental as mainly having an instrumental value for human habitation / recreation, that is, non-human environments don’t necessarily have their own intrinsic value, but gain value through the benefits they offer humans. So while Nadia needs to ‘see greenery to feel good and happy’, the view she expresses contains anthropocentric elements.

Tegan has always lived in urban locations, and her relationship to the environment seems to be based more on general concerns about world-wide environmental degradation. So, while she endeavours to ensure that her lifestyle is the least environmentally damaging she can manage (through, for example, cycling / public transport use and choosing not to buy a car, and by buying clothes made from natural fabrics), and wants to preserve relatively unspoiled environments, she does not regularly spend time in natural environments such as bushland / beaches.

Many participants described a more interactive relationship with the environment, as they ascribed it. Ruby, for example, begins with what she describes as a spiritual relationship with the environment, together with daily interaction with nature:

(Ruby) 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...So, the mountains where I live, to me that environment is absolutely sacred, that’s where I belong...So that environment is really, really important and from that I can get much more of an understanding of what this land is about.

Ruby describes the ways in which she observes and is affected by nature every day, from her reliance on rainfall and the water sources on her property, through to the effect of storms. She talks about the connections with nature and the environment that come through being aware of where water goes once it leaves your property and where it’s been before it arrives on your
property, as well as the importance of knowing where your food comes from, and the size and effect of your own ecological footprint.

Brenda, who lives in an urban environment where there is a lot of surrounding bushland, strongly values the bushland in her own suburb and in other parts of the city where she lives. After a bushfire that devastated parts of her city in the year before our interview, Brenda had been heavily involved in regeneration projects, and was very concerned about plans by local government to construct a road through an area of bushland in another part of the city:

(Brenda) *There are some endangered species, some animals, are not only going to lose their habitat, but they’re undoubtedly going to lose their life. I think the argument is that we can afford to lose that bit of bush to provide for these other needs, and so you gradually see these areas around [here], bush areas, being removed. My sense is that if you do too much of that, then the birdlife and the parts of nature that we need to have for economic and social sustainability are lost.*

Like Ruby, many of the participants referred to a spiritual or moral / ethical element to their relationship with nature. Warren (2000) reminds us that, for the most part, contemporary environmental philosophy has been about environmental ethics. Environmental ethics involves a focus on questions about how humans ought to treat non-human nature, and seeks answers to questions such as ‘What is the nature of humans’ responsibility to the natural environment?’ (Warren 2000 p.73). The spiritual aspects of participants’ relationships with the environment are captured in the words of Claire, Brenda and Marti. Claire was particularly interested in the concept of simplicity:

(Claire) *An approach of simplicity and non-materialism [and], related to that, respect for the environment and ways for us to not violate the environment. I have a dilemma around this because, in terms of material comfort, it is often easier to violate the environment.*

For Brenda, the focus was on the harmony of her inner and outer world:

(Brenda) *A very long time ago, I started to see the environment as an inner, and an outer. I firmly believe that, and experience that, my inner state, my inner environment, is affected by my outer environment. I used not to think that, because I probably used to be quite negative, and having a beautiful environment around me probably wasn’t that important once upon a time, whereas it is now. Starting to realise that the physical environment is not just physical – it’s also the spiritual – opened up a whole new understanding for me, of why it resonates in my heart and in my soul. 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.

Marti’s concern was more with the foundational role of the environment; the basis that it forms for all other systems on the Earth:

(Marti) I think the environment is the bottom line. You haven’t got a society if you haven’t got an environment. You haven’t got an economy if you don’t care for the environment.

A connection to the environment also helps some participants to counter stresses and to deal with life’s difficulties, such as that experienced by Brenda:

(Brenda) In my own moment of crisis, I will go to nature. I’ll go to the top of the mountain, or I’ll go somewhere in the bush, and the solitude and the beauty of the bush is just experiential...I just love driving around watching sunsets, and the clouds and so on. There was always solace for me.

Larry, who described an appreciation of both ‘green’/ natural environments and urban environments, reflected on his connection to nature as nature is manifested in a range of different ways:

(Larry) I’m at home in the environment, although ‘environment’ is probably the wrong word. Nature, and again it’s on that continuum, it’s not necessarily down that wild edge. I find it very refreshing. I love the beauty of nature, the greenness, the colour. I don’t think about it a whole lot, actually...I think that refreshing part is very important to me. I love the cities, too...I do my best thinking when I am out walking – I have my best thoughts and I can’t write them down!

The idea of thrift and voluntary simplicity was mentioned by several participants. Harriet speaks of how the ‘Yorkshire thrift’ that was an intrinsic part of her upbringing has left her with a strong sense of carefulness about waste, and awareness of the impact of her actions. She describes the impact of her awareness as:

(Harriet) You think carefully, and you don’t waste things unnecessarily. You don’t buy a big piece of paper and then only draw a small thing in the middle of it. That sort of thing...and [an awareness that] resources are finite and that we shouldn’t use more than our allotted share that somebody else could do with.

Harriet has been involved in a number of environmental campaigns, and says that it was her involvement in one of those campaigns that influenced her decision to study social work when it became obvious that some people in her community were affected disproportionately by
economic and social conditions. Currently, Harriet describes her relationship with the environment as mainly being embodied in her green lifestyle, which she describes as: ‘My own personal stuff with recycling...I am vegetarian as well. I’ve been vegetarian since I was about ten or eleven because I couldn’t stand the thought of eating little animals’.

The ways in which many participants expressed an interest in, or understanding of, the connections between society and nature and a yearning for a sense of wholeness can be summed up in this comment from Brenda:

(Brenda) *I think it’s all part of it – whether it’s about a social environment or a physical environment or a spiritual environment – they all link together and they’re all part of what makes us whole.*

The descriptions by participants of their current relationship with the environment demonstrate a regard for nature / the environment as residing almost totally within their personal lives. Although participants expressed strong environmental values the expression of this in their workplaces was through behaviours such as recycling and minimising waste. Natural beauty, the impact of nature on lowering stress, nature as a rejuvenating and refreshing force, are qualities relegated to participants’ personal lives, and do not appear to find expression in their workplaces.

**Physical aspects of sustainability**

When asked about sustainability, the majority of participants, at least initially, focussed on activities and attitudes they perceive are needed in order to preserve the environment. Participants expressed a high degree of concern about physical aspects of the environment and sustainability, and mentioned specific aspects of their concern in relation to the natural environment, animal habitat, and biodiversity. Claire, for example, expressed a general disquiet about industrial practices that are harming the environment:

(Claire) *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.*

Many participants expressed a great deal of concern about their own personal ecological footprint (eco-footprint). This concept refers to one way of measuring the amount of resources it takes to provide each person with the kind of lifestyle he or she leads. Typically, a non-Western lifestyle that involves little or no travel by car or plane, has a mainly vegetarian diet, and uses very few electrical / electronic items, would have a very low eco-footprint (Lenzen and Murray 2001).
Earth is considered capable of providing the resources needed, even for a very large human population, where this kind of lifestyle is the norm. Lifestyles in industrialised / Western nations, on the other hand, tend to entail a much higher eco-footprint, and it is acknowledged that such lifestyles cannot be supported from the Earth’s resources over the long-term – particularly if Western lifestyles are embraced in currently non-industrialised countries. On average, Western lifestyles involve high rates of consumption of whitegoods / electronica, high rates of mobility involving private car / plane travel, and a diet usually involving daily consumption of animal protein (Lenzen and Murray 2001).

Many social workers in this study spontaneously discussed the interest they have in the concept of the eco-footprint, and the degree to which it affects their daily lives. Tegan, for example, talks of her developing consciousness of environmental issues as they affect her day-to-day activities in the home, which she describes as: ‘just being aware of the footprints that you tread’. Prior to recently moving interstate to where she now lives, Tegan lived in a shared house among an intentional community that had a focus on sustainability. For her, a raised awareness of her eco-footprint caused her to change her lifestyle in a way that she considered to be more fully conscious of her effect on the planet. She says:

(Tegan) So, for instance, when the washing machine was on, there was a plug in the laundry sink and it just filled up the laundry sink with the water that was used from the washing machine, and that was bucketed and then you would use that to flush the toilet.

Tegan stated that the qualities of her home ‘summed up sustainability’.

Several participants made mention of the changes they have made at their homes or in their personal habits to try to reduce their eco-footprint. For instance, participants had done such things as: installed rainwater tanks at home (Tegan); reducing car usage (Tegan, Shana); and (concomitantly) increasing bicycle / public transport use (Ella); avoiding packaging (Tegan); reducing use of plastic disposable shopping bags (Shana); choosing a small vehicle over a four wheel drive (Shana); choosing vegetarianism (Ella); buying only clothes made from natural fabrics (Tegan); choosing to build a much smaller home because of footprint considerations (Ella); and recycling (Stella). However, many other participants mentioned the eco-footprint in a more general way that indicated their concern with overall consumption levels and practices in Australia.
and the rest of the world. Twelve of the twenty participants specifically nominated ‘green lifestyle’ practices as a form of activism that is part of their lives.

It is clear from the interviews that many participants are very concerned about the lack of general awareness in society of the effects on the environment of consumerist-orientated lifestyles, and about current political inaction on the policies that affect such issues. Harriet, Freya and Stella express typical participants’ worries on this issue:

(Harriet) I worry about how we are going with the populations that we have got and the impact that has upon the environment.
(Freya) People thought that resources were infinite and that the earth could absorb all the garbage we turfed at it.
(Stella) How do we use resources that we don’t have to exploit, because we are running out of all kinds of fuels and things and we are damaging the environment in the process of running out of them, but how do we find a way to run our lives and use wind power and water power and other natural resources that aren’t going to be exploited to run cars...because if we don’t have the economy – we really need the economy to sustain any kind of welfare state.

Apart from the changes participants had made in their own private environments, generally the home, I also asked about the ways in which participants had endeavoured to bring sustainability practices into the workplace. For the most part, participants focused on the sorts of practical changes that would affect the ecological footprint of the organisation for which they worked. Again, the issue of recycling in the workplace was important; trying to educate co-workers and decision-makers in the organisation about recycling, waste management, and limiting water and paper use were the practices mentioned most often. Some had made an impact by changing practices in the workplace such as: being vigilant about the use of the dishwasher in the staff kitchen and trying to ensure all staff are aware of how to most effectively use the dishwasher, ensuring it was only turned on when fully-loaded; requesting the use of recycled paper for printing / photocopying; requesting extra bins so that recyclable paper, metals, and plastics can be separated; reducing the use of polystyrene cups; ensuring that environmentally-friendly cleaning products are used: ‘Thinking about the products we use, I was looking at the detergents here and recognising that they haven’t got the green symbol so, slowly but surely, I’ll change that’ (Tilly); raising awareness about issues of air quality / air conditioning (Claire); providing a set of crockery for the office ‘so that people didn’t use throw away stuff’ (Claire); minimising work travel (Harriet); actively reducing waste production:
(Shana) You know you go to courses where they put out reams and reams of photocopies of articles, and people go around and pick every one up. They never read them, so I don’t do that. What I do is I put a little plastic folder and I have the article in there, and I have a sheet next to it that says ‘If you would like a copy of this article, please write your name down’. People then decide whether they want it or not, they don’t just go through and take everything. And I say to people ‘the greenie in me doesn’t want to just give you a copy of this, but if you would like it I’m happy to give it to you’. And if people have to then make a choice, often they don’t [put their name down].

One participant went to the trouble of taking direct action to encourage colleagues at the workplace to get into recycling mode:

(Taylor) 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.

These descriptions by participants indicate that several have taken an active stance in their workplace to try to introduce more pro-environmental practices and, in some instances, to educate their colleagues about more sustainable practices.

A third physical aspect of participants’ concerns about sustainability is related to natural resources such as biodiversity and habitat – namely, loss of habitat for wildlife, as well as loss of plant-life more generally. Brenda, for example, in talking about some road-works that are proposed in her district, discussed the effect on the wildlife in the area:

(Brenda) There are some endangered species – some animals are not only going to lose their habitat, but they’re undoubtedly going to lose their life.

Brenda linked her concerns about the environment for wildlife to her concerns about broader sustainability issues. In discussion about the roadworks as they relate to the threatened removal of a particular local area of bush, Brenda extrapolated her local experience to a general concern:

(Brenda) My sense is that if you do too much of that then the birdlife and the parts of nature that we need to have for economic and social sustainability are lost.

The cumulative effects of small changes to wildlife habitat were also of concern for other participants. Lucy made a comment that reflected concern not only about cumulative loss of habitat generally, but about the way such changes offer either privilege or destruction to individual species:
(Lucy) And I think, again, the sustainability: I’m thinking globally but an example is cutting down a few trees here and there might not make a great difference, but if the island of trees becomes too small then not only do the trees die but all the animals and birds that were living there also are affected or the species change so that other species dominate in a way that didn’t happen before. It’s that chaotic rolling out of change that concerns me.

The physical aspects of their environment were clearly linked by participants to their concern for sustainability. This led me to ask participants what it is they mean when they use this term.

**Definition of sustainability**

Participants were asked what they mean by the term ‘sustainability’. Social justice was a broad concern for participants, and most participants identified sustainability as a broad spectrum of attitudes and activities that are needed in order to benefit the community, and planet, as a whole. Tilly, Sam and Ella, in particular, had given a lot of thought to this question and viewed sustainability as an intrinsic aspect of their lives. For Tilly, the issue of sustainability underpins much of her personal decision-making:

(Tilly) I think about sustainability around how I live my life, you know, the money I spend, what I’m spending it on, what I won’t...and it’s about my consciousness and my place in the world.

Sustainability is an ongoing issue for Sam, and she had thought a lot about what it means to her:

(Sam) Sustainability is about us not taking more than we are able to give back, or we are able to support in its development and growth. It’s not just about ‘we give one, we take one’. It’s actually about ‘we are going to have to make up for the fact that we have been taking ten and giving one for a long time’. So if we want to sustain something that is happening now, we are going to have to give more up than we take perhaps. So we are going to have to make up for some of that. It’s about creating a long-term balance, long-term harmony. ‘Sustainable’ is about being able to maintain over a long period of time and it is also again going to be based on your values about what rights we have, a sense of equality – that sort of stuff – because it is not just about me maintaining my lifestyle, because I can do that. I live in a very powerful nation at some level, but what about sustainability for other people, for other peoples’ homelands? I actually think sustainability is about redressing some imbalance. Long-term sustainability is not about retaining the status quo, it will actually be about trying to reduce countries, like Australia’s, footprint, trying to bring into line what the Western nations use of the earth’s resources relative to other people.

Ella had also thought a lot about sustainability, and was clear about what it means to her:
The generally accepted beginning definition that talks about sustainability and not compromising future generations, I don’t feel comfortable with because it is very anthropocentric. It is very much about not compromising future people and I think that misses the point. The fact that that definition of sustainability doesn’t mention the environment anywhere I find fascinating. But it is, while saying that, a useful definition because it is one that people, no matter where they fall on the spectrum of understanding and values, it seems to be a unifying definition.

Ella goes on to say that if the definition had included the intrinsic rights of all species for survival and the importance of biodiversity, she realises it would not have been accepted by economists, nor would it have the support of the general populace. So, while she doesn’t fully agree with the usual definition, she does value it. In specifying her own definition of sustainability:

Sustainability for me, at a more personal level, I guess for me it is about absolutely minimising, certainly reducing, our ecological footprint. Minimising it as much as possible. I don’t think I have worked out a threshold of what I see as being acceptable or sustainable because, to be fair, I don’t think anyone has...Perhaps the word that pops out of all that is ‘balance’, of trying to find some sort of balance...Sustainability for me would be not losing any more species from the planet. I think that would be a good indicator that we are at a sustainable level.

The problems associated with environmental degradation were causing Ella a lot of worry, and she concludes her thoughts on sustainability by saying:

I think if we don’t do something about encouraging sustainability in our country - especially in our country, but [also] the rest of the world – then not only will we wipe ourselves out, but we will wipe out everyone else.

Ella’s concern that humans are on a path of self-destruction are echoed by several other participants, and their concern seems to be related to the lack of connectedness that they perceive. The lack of connectedness is to do with increasing levels of isolation participants observe in the broader society; lack of general understanding of the intertwined fortunes of people and the natural environment; and the development of the market economy that has brought with it a concomitant focus on globalisation, consumerism, and materialism. These ideas are expanded upon in the next section, which deals with the context for participants’ concerns about the environment.
The context for concerns about the environment

Participants made it clear that there are many contextual issues that have a bearing on their environmental concerns. The role of capitalism and the predominance of economic analyses as a fundamental lens for setting the broad social agenda were two major concerns. Many participants were forthright in their views on this matter. For example, Ruby, Claire and Sam were very specific in expressing their concerns about the influence of economic considerations on environmental degradation and / or sustainability, particularly related to concerns about the effects of industrialisation:

(Ruby) We just haven’t acknowledged how much the economic bottom line has influenced the way we talk about sustainability. So, I think it’s implicitly become the most important thing...I don’t think the debate has really been had about how much it’s an economic tool.

(Claire) 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.

(Sam) We have a huge sort of multi-national conglomerate that have convinced us of the value and the status of big four-wheel drives, without any kind of thought.

Larry expressed a more general concern when he said ‘Almost anything the economy does affects the environment’. Other participants went on to mention the flow-on effects to social systems of the perceived impacts of economic imperatives. Keisha, Stella and Taylor all expressed such concerns:

(Keisha) I don’t want to live in a society where we have economic growth [but] this is where we’re going, sadly, with a small proportion of very, very wealthy people and a whole lot of people whose views don’t ever get heard and who aren’t making it at all and whose needs we’re just not considering.

(Stella) 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.

(Taylor) I think that a lot of the primary products that we have stolen or taken from the earth in the last century are driving a lot of the capitalism at the moment, which makes it hard for them to give up on it because those businesses who are very, very rich – they have a lot of money in them. I think that is what holds it back...people keeping hold of their precious power and money.
Many participants were worried that the influence of the economic agenda creates a dominant paradigm in Western society that encourages consumerist/materialist orientated lifestyles that are relatively oblivious to environmental concerns or to sustainability in general, as opposed to encouragement of lifestyles that are more environmentally/sustainability conscious. Shana, Marti, Athena and Ruby had frank views on the matter:

(Shana) I don’t think we can sustain our Western lifestyle, and we couldn’t possibly entertain bringing everyone else up to that Western lifestyle because the planet just couldn’t sustain that.

(Marti) I get a sense that this is going to be lifelong battle for everybody and I don’t know how we do it.

(Athena) Like, the Western world think they have everything, but – I guess that’s what I think about in terms of sustainability, and the amount of food we eat without thinking about it and the amount of water we use.

(Ruby) A lot of the sustainability stuff that I see now is about maintaining the status quo in terms of industry, in terms of the carbon that we’re allowed to use in the so-called developed countries. It’s maintaining our current lifestyles and our current levels of consumption, but trying to say we need to do something about the consequences of that.

Ruby was also concerned about her lack of control over her own complicity in a system that is actively undermining sustainability. Her superannuation investment, for example, is a source of concern:

(Ruby) The place where my superannuation is invested impacts on the people I work with. I mean, how can I get up and say we should start talking about environmental things when my superannuation invests in Wesfarmers, or in Westfield shopping centres, or in BHP Billiton.

Ruby then extends the discussion of her concerns to some common workplace practices:

(Ruby) It just seems like such a contradiction, so personally and in our workplaces...We have Nescafe in our tearoom - we don’t talk about fair trade, we don’t talk about the environmental degradation that happens to produce the things we drink for morning tea.

Participants’ described some of the everyday dilemmas faced when making consumer choices. It seems that it is difficult to make an ethical choice when it comes to many ordinary, everyday consumer items:
So when you go to the grocery store, is it better to buy something that is wrapped in paper or wrapped in plastic? Is it better to buy something that is Australian made and owned versus something that may be more ideally environmentally packaged? So, you make one choice, but it has repercussions in lots of different areas. I find it really hard to support all of the things that I want to support because sometimes if I want to buy — [for example] because I drink tea and coffee, so if I want to buy tea and coffee that isn’t coming from exploited areas, then I will buy the fair trade. But, if I wanted to buy the same product that was much more environmentally packaged, then there is always a choice and it is like you are almost forced to rank your values and your priorities...I like to buy Australian made and owned, but then that isn’t always the best choice. It is choices all the time, and sometimes it gets so tiring.

Sam also worries about the consumer choices that other people are making:

One of the things that I really worry about women and our society today is just how consumerist it is. You just have to drive to the new housing estates — you do a home visit in a new housing estate and you walk in and you think you are walking into a showroom, and people live like that out there. I think generally people and women, too, are defining themselves much, much more these days by what you have. Land since the 1950’s is becoming much smaller, but it is the houses getting much bigger.

Thus, while participants indicated that they have made, or are trying to make, their own lifestyles more sustainable, they indicated that this is often an uphill battle because it is made more difficult by the dominant paradigm of the society in which they live and work. Participants on the whole indicate that they feel they are swimming against a very dominant tide of consumerism and materialism; that trying to be environmentally-conscious and to live a sustainable lifestyle is hard work in the society in which they find themselves.

After detailing some of her lifestyle practices, such as recycling, Stella expressed a concern that might even be described as guilt about her choices / lifestyle:

I personally would like to be demonstrating more action towards sustainability. I have involvement in other areas that, I guess, make me feel like I’m doing something, but in my personal and household life I would like to be doing a lot more – but I am constrained by things.

It is apparent that concerns about lifestyle and the environment have taken some emotional toll on many of the participants in this study. Sam expressed a great deal of distress about the state of the world and her concern for the impact on people and on society in general, and at the same time she notes ‘Some of my colleagues deliberately make choices to not get concerned about this stuff because they, you know, ‘this is all I can deal with at the moment’.
It seems that for some people at least, it’s just easier not to get involved, and this phenomenon speaks to the difficulty that any individual has in trying to swim against the tide of the dominant paradigm. However, Sam at least, holds out some hope for broad social change, as she says there are already examples around of how broad social behavioural change can be brought about:

(Sam) When Woolies pushed their ‘Let’s reduce plastic bags’ campaign, I got a little glossy from Woolies to say they aimed to reduce the use of plastic bags by ‘x’ amount by the end of the year. The target they set – we know the way to reach targets is to set targets that are so incredibly low – and they could have done that, but I don’t know that they did that. Because I think when you walk around the street now you constantly see people with those green Woolies bags. You see people walking to the shops, and they don’t look like your typical kind of ‘greenie’. What makes it attractive is that it is something people can do and they see the impact every day – like: ‘I am carrying my green bag, other people are seeing it, I’m seeing it, and I know I have done it.’. It’s easy. It is easier for people to embrace that kind of stuff. And realistically, a plastic bag versus a Woolies green bag, it doesn’t pose, you know – it’s not that difficult. But not driving my four-wheel drive, that is difficult. And we have also created that there is status in carrying your green Woolies bag now.

As Sam points out, it seems easier to bring about behavioural change in some of the smaller consumer activities, and perhaps not so easy for the bigger, perhaps more important issues. Ella is even less hopeful that answers will be readily forthcoming:

(Ella) There is that trust that technology will work all that out, and I don’t agree with that. Well, I can understand that we will end up surviving to a degree, we’re tackling the salinity stuff, but it’s certainly not the ideal situation and there will be suffering.

Many authors point out that the change needed for achievement of a sustainable lifestyle must be values-driven rather than technology-driven (Low and Gleeson 1999; Warren 2000, Coates 2003a). The potential of social work to assist in this transformation may in part depend on the ability of the profession to recognise and act on the links between society and sustainability. These links are explored in the next section.

Social sustainability

Some participants were familiar with the term ‘social sustainability’, though most were not. Either way, I asked participants what they understood by the term ‘social sustainability’ or what they thought it could/ might mean. Participants held a range of views, but were united in their ideas about social sustainability implying some sort of connectedness in the community. Tegan, for
example, expressed one of the more utopian views when she said: ‘I guess that [would mean] thinking about being part of a community, where people aren’t so isolated’. Tegan views social changes such as an increased reliance on bicycle-riding as a form of transport as one way of increasing community linkages:

(Tegan) *I think even riding a bike can increase your sense of community, because someone might ask you the directions for how to get somewhere, which they wouldn’t be able to ask you in a car because they are really closed in and it is harder to approach...Just having some sort of interaction with people around you could decrease fears that maybe people feel about other people, through the media or whatever.*

Tegan went on to describe how she regularly catches the train to her state capital city, and feels more in touch with a range of people – ‘it keeps you in touch with what’s out there and who is there’. Tegan seems to be suggesting that the simple act of being in contact with other people by being in the same physical space has a positive social effect, and can be seen as one aspect of the ‘glue’ that makes communities sustainable.

On the other hand, Athena referred to the ‘increasing brokenness’ of communities and of social relations, and the way this is affecting her own outlook:

(Athena) *And it is just really worrying. I think you could get quite depressed about it actually. Recently I have been realising that I really play into it, and I do it without thinking, like exploiting things and not thinking about the future, and about there being sustainability in all parts of the world and life.*

Ruby’s ideas about social sustainability evoked an idealised concept of community, focussing on smaller communities, principles of self-sufficiency, and less focussed on the 9-5 office hours to bring a sense of industriousness:

(Ruby) *The whole wholistic thing has really opened my eyes, so every day it evolves. Spending time with the slow food movement last year was another key thing. Just seeing the flow-on effects: the cultural, re-valuing of traditional food, the agricultural, the value in a small landholding, the social and the family and how they all came together, and being part of five-hour lunches.*

On the other hand, Ruby foresees a different kind of lifestyle becoming predominant in Australia: ‘I think that we are kissing goodbye to small family landholdings, and once we do that, the impact of that socially will be just extraordinary’.
Lucy made some observations about social sustainability that possibly have some parallels with Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, though involving social actualisation rather than self-actualisation:

(Lucy) Personal capacity and therefore sustainability of the individual is increasingly a part of what is needed in the social work arena. What is also an underpinning matter in my view is the individual’s sense of self and self-esteem, and without that nothing else really moves forward. And yet that sense of self is what I see as sustainable, and when you get groups of people with that strong sense of self then that is when communities are sustainable.

Freya’s thoughts on social sustainability reflected a concern for future generations:

(Freya) For years, up to the 60’s and 70’s, people thought that resources were infinite and that the earth could absorb all the garbage we threw at it. But that’s not the case, and if it’s not – we need to be looking at doing something about it so that future generations can survive.

Marti was concerned with the broader connections that make up the whole of a sustainability approach:

(Marti) I think sustainability is absolutely vital and, coming from a Christian perspective, I guess my theology says that I’m part of the force that should be working towards caring for everything. That we are part of a creation that requires continuance, continuing advocacy, and caring. So, from a theological perspective I see that as really important, and then social work fits into that with that sense of that, I guess, as being just part of a system. Every individual needs the system to function wholly, and sustainability is about making sure those systems function wholly forever and that we don’t run out of part of the system that we need.

Overall, participants’ views on social sustainability provided much contrast. A concern with a sense of wholeness for communities and society was firmly evident, but was contrasted with a sense that the opposite seems to be what’s happening; that communities are losing their connections, that the ‘glue’ is not holding together, and what participants seem to be observing is a greater degree of what some of them labelled as ‘brokenness’.

Relevance of ‘sustainability’ concepts to social work practice

Ruby had a lot to say about the connections between sustainability and social work practice. For example, she says that 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 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?’ 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’s questioning of the rigid dichotomies about what belongs ‘inside’ the realm of social work practice interest, and what belongs ‘outside’, is consistent with a theoretical shift toward postmodern approaches to practice whereby possibilities are opened up by alternative discourses, thus recognising different perspectives than those that have been traditionally acknowledged in formal health and welfare institutions (Healy 2005). Postmodern perspectives are seen as drawing on aspects of established practice approaches, while at the same time they also represent a break with the discourses and theories underpinning the formal base of social work practice (Healy 2005).

**Discussion**

The social workers in this study express a high degree of concern for ‘the environment’, most obviously as represented by non-human nature. Social workers in Australia, like the general population, are concerned about the environment. An AASW survey in 2001 found that members identified ‘ecological sustainability’ as one of their top ten social policy priorities (AASW 2001). This is consistent with surveys of the general population, which have found that between sixty and eighty per cent of people consider ‘the environment’ to be one of their top ten concerns (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006b). However, even though the environment is a general concern, there remains for the social workers in this study a sense that they are on the margins, both in their profession and in society generally, as shown by their sense of being outside the dominant paradigm.

Coates (2003a) firmly places the basis of this dilemma for social workers in the tensions between environmental imperatives, on the one hand, and social work’s embeddedness in modernism on the other. The values and beliefs of modernity, expressing prioritisation of individual economic wellbeing and competition over community wellbeing, consumerism, industrialism and progressivism, are at odds with social work values, which emphasise human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence (as expressed in the code of ethics of the AASW 2000). Nevertheless social work is a profession that was born in modernity, and early
forms of social work were evident in charitable works aimed at people whose poverty was a by-product from the very beginnings of the industrial revolution (Alston and McKinnon 2005). Coates (2003a p.35) argues that the dominant values of modernity ‘govern human thought and social structures, and influence our lives in almost every area’, and reach full expression in the ‘consumer society’, where consumption has become the key motivator.

The increasing prevalence of consumerist values are explained by Bauman (2001; 2004a; 2004b) in his concept of ‘liquid modernity’. Bauman argues that the state of liquidity inherently favours citizens who are in a position to move readily to take advantage of ever-changing conditions. People who can do this are said to comprise the ‘tourist’ classes – i.e. those who can afford to travel (for employment or commerce opportunities, for example), to keep up with the latest technologies, and to stay in touch with the world in a very immediate and interactive way. Because modern industrial society favours so much the set of conditions that are an advantage to the ‘tourists’, the values and lifestyle of the ‘tourists’ have come to comprise the dominant paradigm. Thus while ‘tourists’ are the ultimate consumers, those who cannot afford to live in this way, or who choose not to, comprise the ‘vagabonds’. ‘Vagabonds’ lack the means or the motivation to take full advantage of the ever-shifting conditions. Those who cannot afford to, or choose not to, adopt the tourist lifestyle are commonly regarded with suspicion (Bauman 2004a). Families and individuals from lower socio-economic backgrounds are generally filling the position of ‘vagabond’ in Bauman’s reading of the current social conditions in Western society, and vagabonds generally are under suspicion because of their lesser ability to carry out the role of conspicuous consumer.

At a time when ones’ accumulation of property and material goods carries more weight than ones’ deeds, a person’s character can come to be judged by what they own, rather than their moral conduct (i.e. how they live, their conduct toward others, etc.) (Bauman 2004a; 2004b). Suspiciousness of vagabonds is confirmed through their perceived criminal behaviour and the fact that jails are filling up more and more quickly all over the Western world. However, this common view fails to take into account the fact that it is the ‘tourists’ who have control of the criminal justice system: deciding what counts as a crime and what does not. So, for example, at a time when commerce, economic activity, and the accumulation of material wealth hold a highly privileged place in society, white collar crimes (such as fraud) draw far less reprobation than do property crimes (such as car theft). Coates (2003a p.35) also refers to the current value system as informing ‘the consumer-oriented and market-dominated production processes and lifestyles that
dominate western culture and, through, it, enslaves the world’. Coates urges social workers to resist the domination of consumerist values.

Participants’ concern was expressed in many statements that conveyed distress about what they were experiencing and observing in regard to the environment. Most expressed disquiet with dominant western lifestyle values, whereby consumerism is privileged in the cultural hegemony. The participants in this study were concerned about the impacts on the environment of the cultural hegemony expressed through the dominance of consumerism. Given that the expressed values of social work emphasise human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence (AASW 2000), there is a dilemma for these social workers both as members of the broader society, and in their professional roles in organisations that are also embedded within the dominant western consumerist paradigm (Binkley 2008).

The forces of growth and accumulation, values of competitiveness and dominance, as well as dualistic thinking and individualism have substantially contributed to patterns of economic development and consumption that are unsustainable (Coates 2003a). In addition, these forces also bring about ecological destruction and social injustice because the current levels of economic development are based on consumption of nature (Plumwood 2002; Coates 2003a). The beliefs and values of modernity lead to people and nature being treated in similar ways, that is, as resources for production, as commodities, rather than as members of a human or planetary community (Coates 2003a).

Plumwood (2002) refers to the current situation not as an environmental crisis, but rather as a crisis of reason. She places the roots of current environmental problems in the reasoning blindspots that have been established in Western culture in ever-increasing waves, beginning with ancient Greek thinkers, reinforced by Descartes and other Enlightenment thinkers, and enacted in the forces of industrialisation. For Plumwood (2002 p.17), concepts of rationality ‘have been corrupted by systems of power into hegemonic forms that establish, naturalise and reinforce privilege’. Participants in the current study who expressed feelings of marginalisation, were expressing values and interests that they perceive as very different to the dominant values of their society.

Most participants in the study expressed a sense of impending doom, and frustration that there is not greater recognition and action about the environmental crisis. Like many of the participants,
Plumwood (2002) has a pessimistic view of our ability to achieve the rate and amount of change that is needed in Western society for a more sustainable lifestyle to become the entrenched hegemony. She observes that the necessary social change needed to reduce the impact of current rates of consumption and begin building a society capable of surviving has not been occurring.

The participants identified climate change and the impact of unsustainable lifestyles as being among their primary concerns about the environment, at a time when climate change is principally associated with the global warming caused by rising levels of carbon dioxide in the environment (Stern 2006). Carbon dioxide has been recorded at ever-increasing levels in the atmosphere since the onset of industrialisation in the Western world over the last two hundred years (IPCC 2007).

Concerns reported by participants about the impacts of modern lifestyles are reflected in debates among social theorists. The processes of industrialisation are closely associated with the phenomena of globalisation (Giddens 1992), and includes the multiplicity of social and economic factors associated with the movement of people, technology, commerce, and cultures across national borders. In early industrial society, the side effects of modernisation were accepted because of the rewards it offered in the struggle against scarcity (Wallace and Wolf 2006). Hunger, however, is no longer the major problem it was, yet people face hazards and risks that are ‘a wholesale product of industrialisation and are systematically intensified as it becomes global’ (Giddens 1992, p.21). Beck (2010) argues that risk in modern society is, above all, associated with chemical and nuclear production forces and the effects of global warming.

Participants in this study expressed a high degree of concern about a host of forces that they identify as having a negative impact on the environment. Consumerism, materialism, globalisation, and the dominance of the values of a market-driven economy are the major issues of concern identified by participants. These concerns are also reflected in the social work and social theory literature, and participants in this study may well represent a rising tide of unease within social work about the direction of dominant social forces.

Notions of social justice, based in concepts of fairness and equity, have underpinned the development of social work theories and practice models since the beginnings of the profession (Valentine 2004). Concerns about materialism and consumerism expressed by participants reflect a deep-seated professional concern with fairness. Participants expressed awareness of the impacts of their own behaviours upon others, including future generations, as well as the impacts
of various social groups’ consumer behaviour upon other social groups. Participants’ values of justice and fair play appear to be challenged by the behaviours and social changes that they are observing.

**Conclusion**

This chapter began with a description of the demographic characteristics of the participants, including their educational background and history of activism, and reported the major issues raised by participants in regard to the environment and sustainability. Participants’ experiences and understandings of ‘the environment’ were explored, as well as concerns about environmental and sustainability issues in participants’ personal lives and in their workplaces.

The themes of connectedness and brokenness emerged from the analysis of the interviews, and these themes were explored in the discussion. The difficulties associated with trying to live an ethical lifestyle in a society where it is not necessarily easy to make pro-environment consumer choices were also canvassed, together with the worries associated with a perception of being in a social minority.

In the next chapter, I present the issues raised by participants in relation to social work practice – in particular, the dilemmas participants face in their professional role because of their concerns about the environment, participants’ questioning of the boundaries of their professional role, and the domain of social work practice in regard to questions around how legitimate and legitimised practice is defined and accepted in social work.
Chapter 6: Social work: ‘this separation of public and private’

Introduction

This chapter discusses participants’ identity issues associated with professional roles and boundaries, and questions about legitimate / legitimised practice. Participants showed a high degree of interest in concerns around what belongs in practice and what belongs outside the boundary of social work. At the same time, participants were questioning the separation of their private and public / professional roles, which raises issues around feminist questions about personal / political frameworks and the methods and discourses that affect the ways in which interests are upheld, or promoted, or indeed deemed legitimate. This is also an interesting debate in the light of the distinction made in the AASW Code of Ethics (2000 p.10) in regard to a social worker’s private and professional life, which requires that ‘social workers’ private conduct will not compromise the fulfilment of professional responsibilities’. The issues raised by participants in the interviews reflect ongoing dilemmas about congruence between the personal and professional self, and the difficulty participants have in reconciling their personal interests with AASW and organisational constraints in regard to what is considered to be legitimate social work practice.

Identity themes

In reality, social workers have co-existing, multi-layered loyalties to their clients, their practice models, employer organisations / institutions, and other professional associations, all of which impact on the perception of identity. Questions about professional identity therefore cannot be dealt with as if existing in any static sense, and should rather be viewed as dynamic and developmental. In addition, the multi-disciplinary nature of most workplaces means that there may be occasional shifts among social workers with sometimes a general identification with the professional values of the human services field, while at other times social workers may identify more closely with social work as a specialisation. So, while social work is a profession that is enormously varied, according to historical, institutional and geographical contexts, there are certain cultural identity characteristics that unify social workers – most notably the values that form the basis of codes of ethics for social work associations around the world (Healy 2005).

In the process of analysing the interview transcripts, it became clear that participants’ responses to questions about professional identity fell into two major categories. The analysis revealed that
there were ten recurring themes identified by participants. The themes were: activism, agent of the state or of social control, bigger picture, social justice, social/ecological connections, management pressures, narrowing of role / focus, complexity, negative perceptions by others, and lack of role clarity. Some of these themes might be considered as specific to social work (such as activism and social justice), while others could potentially be relevant to a range of professions (such as lack of role clarity and management pressures).

When the themes where entered into N-VIVO as a model diagram and the associations between each theme were drawn in, the themes fell into two distinctive groups of five. While each of the five were connected to each other in terms of when and how they were mentioned by participants, they were not connected to the five in the other group. The two major categories can broadly be defined as ‘positive’ factors and ‘negative’ factors associated with participants’ social work / professional identity. The ways in which the themes clustered are demonstrated in Figures 2 and 3. The positive themes are discussed first, followed by the negative themes.

Figure 2: Positive identity themes

Figure 3: Negative identity themes
Positive identity themes

Participants were, for the most part, very strong in their comments about being a social worker and showed positive identification with their chosen profession. Four out of five of the positive factors associated with identity were factors that are quite commonly discussed in social work discourses. Social justice, practice complexity, the bigger picture of systemic inter-relationships, and social activism are factors that have all been heartily debated in social work literature and education (see, for example, Parton and O’Byrne 2000; Payne 2005; Thompson 2002; Healy 2005). However, the fifth factor identified by the participants in this study, eco-social connections, is not well-known in the social work literature. Each of the positive factors is next discussed in turn.

Social justice

Social justice was a common theme identified by all participants as a concept important to their social work identity. Most mentioned the concept by name, while others described the social justice aspects of their work as striving for equity, equality, and access for disadvantaged members of society.

(Taylor) *The initial drive behind social work in the first place is that common collective feeling of trying to help or trying to get a better position for those most marginalised in our society.*

Other participants were more direct in the language describing social justice, such as Ella when she said ‘I have always talked about justice. Social justice. For me, that’s what social work is all about’. This sentiment was echoed in Gayle’s comment: ‘For me, I am talking about social justice. I’m talking about being a social justice practitioner’. Melanie, too, was explicit:

(Melanie) ‘I identify more with social work from the social justice perspective, and, like, a political perspective, but I tend not to identify from a casework perspective’, and she relates to social work practice that is ‘more advocacy-focused, that is more social justice focussed’, and says ‘there’s always been that commitment to social justice’.

Tilly commented that she is driven by ‘the principles of social justice, around self-determination. Like transparency of practice, equity, fairness, all those things drive my thinking every day’.

Mentions of social justice as an aspect of social work identity were strongly linked to aspects of practice such as advocacy, empowerment, and humanistic values. Keisha, for example, said: ‘I
think about social work as advocacy, that it’s a really strong feature of what I take on, and it’s about self-determination’.

When asked what social work is about, Claire said: ‘I think it is about social justice. I think that’s a strong identity these days’. However, Claire did go on to say ‘just because you’re a social worker doesn’t mean you’re the only one who’s got that’, and she warns against social work having some sort of ‘holier than thou’ attitude because of its reliance on a social justice perspective.

The concept of social justice is a relatively unclear one in social work discourses. Valentine (2004) examines the history and meaning of the concept for social workers, and finds that ‘social justice’ has not been clearly defined in the literature. It is therefore unsurprising that some participants’ responses, as described above, showed a confident use of the term ‘social justice’ while others appeared to be speaking about social justice without actually naming it.

Common conceptions of social justice in the social work literature are tied to the reduction of social inequality and social disadvantage across class, race and gender lines (Ife 2002). For some, the welfare state has been an important aspect of the fight for social justice, although it can be seen that the development of an extensive social welfare safety net has not been achieved even remotely evenly across nation states. Many social work writers decry the decline of the welfare state, and view a robust welfare state as the best mechanism for achievement of a fairer society. Others take the view that a more fundamental structural change is needed in order for society to be considered a ‘fair’ place for all its members, with the welfare state seen as only ever capable of ameliorating the worst effects of structural disadvantage (Ife 2002 p.18).

The dominance of neo-classical economics discourses across the industrially developed world in recent decades has overseen a severe decline in the provision of social welfare safety nets compared to the levels of the 1970’s. For social workers who view the welfare state as pivotal to the achievement of social justice aims the decline of the welfare state has left social work practice in an invidious position, whereby a key defining concept of the profession has little traction in the broader community – especially among key political decision-makers (Leonard 2001). The decline of the welfare state, so far as it is associated with the social justice aims of the social work profession, can be viewed as a challenge to the professional identity of social workers.
Complexity

Social work practice is identified by the participants as a complex activity. Complexity is associated by the participants with, firstly, the people and situations with which they deal in practice. Secondly, complexity is associated with the ways in which the participants work with individuals, groups and communities. Thirdly, complexity is associated with the type of thinking, communicative and relational activities participants are required to do in order to reach successful outcomes – in whatever ways ‘successful’ might be defined. This includes having the ability to work in situations of uncertainty and change. Lucy, for example, noted that:

_The issues that people come with now are far more complex than what they were twenty years ago, far more complex, and so there are greater complexities within society. There are greater social issues and ethical issues that everyday people are coping with, or trying to cope with, and when they have difficulties with it, then social work is one of the services they access._

Lucy seems to be saying that working with complexity requires higher-order thinking when she goes on to say:

_I think that is one of the things that social workers are particularly good at: about broadening the spectrum of thinking. And that is one of the things that gets us into the hot water that we get into, because...social workers are able to see consequences on both sides of it, or [ask] ‘have you thought about?’, or ‘what about?’._

Melanie also commented on the, to her, easily identifiable aspect of social workers when she said: ‘I can still pick them, usually in a group – can’t you? They’re the person, in any community, you go to and ask the big questions’. In addition, the ability to tap into needed resources is seen as a social work response to complexity, such as that shown in Claire’s comment: ‘there’s a general wellspring of resourcefulness that a lot of social workers have’.

Melanie voiced her view about social work practice as an activity that takes place without necessarily a clear set of formulas or ground rules for decision-making: ‘good community development workers were always aware of context and uncertainty, of diversity’. Melanie says that community development ‘Should be concerned with community, with diversity, [and] shouldn’t have blueprints, but should go with the flow and listen to what people are saying’. Thompson (2000 p.68) describes the ability of social workers to make professional practice decisions in situations of uncertainty as ‘dialectical reason’. Dialectical reason is based in the understanding that social phenomena are dynamic rather than being based in unchanging truths
or fixed categories (Thompson 2000). Social workers often deal with individuals, groups and communities where social life is characterised by conflict, interaction and change. At the same time, Thompson (2000) claims we need to recognise that the knowledge base of social work is contested, interactive and changing.

Ella made mention of the way in which ‘social work can be associated with difficult and challenging work, and having to make tough decisions’. Nevertheless she indicates that she views social workers as having a deep understanding of complexity when she says:

_I know that if I am working with someone else who is a social worker, I just know they have an intuitive deeper understanding of what is going on, they will look for the deeper issues, they’ll look for the deeper connections, and do that in a very positive, empowering, freeing way that builds independence._

Thompson (2000) says that we should not underestimate the skills involved in using knowledge in practice, and this process involves selecting the elements of knowledge that are relevant in a given situation, integrating theory and practice, and the ability to reflect on actions and their consequences.

Sam indicates that she sees professionals from other allied health disciplines as having a simpler job than social workers:

_Social workers, I think, come out with a more generalist sort of degree, where if you put a new grad OT in a hospital they have got the anatomy, the physiology to go and do what they have to do with that patient. But when we come into a hospital, you get a referral to go and see someone who is newly diagnosed with diabetes, you have to learn about diabetes in order to have some meaningful conversation with them, as well as learn the whole stuff about how to negotiate your way through a very complex system and do that whilst hanging on to your social work values._

Participants who work in health settings, in particular, most often said that they were the first port of call when colleagues were working with people who were highly emotional, and at the same time participants also felt they were sometimes the last resort for referrals to work with people who had been relegated to the ‘too hard’ basket. Lucy, for instance, had a sense that other health staff have a more-or-less paradoxical view of social workers: ‘They sort out the financial things or the accommodation things or the ‘too hard basket’ or the financial issues. Anybody who is crying – well, we’d better send them to a social worker. So there is that sense of social workers being
able to cope with things that maybe the rest of the so-called professionals don’t feel they have the skills to deal with or aren’t interested in’.

**Bigger picture**

A common social work identity theme identified by the participants was a sense of social workers being aware of or interested in ‘the bigger picture’. This theme suggests a focus of wholism in social work. Interest in the ‘bigger picture’ among participants ranges from avoidance of individualising the people with whom they work, through to taking up the cause of women and minority groups, to the broad abilities of those who are educated in the social work tradition.

Claire commented that:

> I choose to see that bringing a family in, even if it’s only one other member, can be very valuable. When I was working with women at a women’s health service, even then sometimes I would encourage the husband to come in. At CAMHS, it’s probably better to get the family in if you can. If you don’t get them in to talk with them about those other people – what impact they have – to talk about what impact neighbours and extended family, schools and churches and all those things have on them, is very much a social work approach and I identify very strongly with that.

Brenda says that social workers ‘bring a strong sense of the individual in [the] community, the individual being influenced by many influences and many factors’. Ella commented that ‘social work is so broad and that’s what I love about it’. She sees social workers as having the ability to work at multiple levels, whereby: ‘I can be working directly, it can be research, it can be policy...It is a values-driven profession. I have always talked about justice, social justice – to me that’s what social work is about, that’s what separates it’.

McMahon (1996) notes that, as a maturing profession, social work educators and practitioners are using more complex conceptualisations. ‘At this time’, McMahon (1996 p.5) notes, ‘social work leaders are calling for a more comprehensive conception of practice as they continue to engage in exchanging concepts with other disciplines and pursue their search for wholeness’.

**Activism**

Participants were almost unanimous in mentioning social work’s activist tradition as an aspect of their profession which they view very positively. Activism in this context refers to a range of activities and political / personal / professional positions that indicate questioning of the dominant paradigm where that paradigm includes acceptance of inequity. Activism can mean taking an
active public position about an issue by, for example, participating in a public demonstration or march, or putting one’s name to an open published letter. It may also mean questioning of public policy via submission to a committee of inquiry. Activism also refers to professional practice with individuals, groups and communities that recognises existing structural inequities and strives to reduce the impact of those inequities.

The Settlement House Movement in the USA in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s is often cited as an example of the kind of activism to which many social workers aspire. At an historical moment when individual pathology / fault was seen as the prime reason for poverty, Jane Addams and her group set up a community service that offered health, housing, education and welfare services to Chicago’s poorest individuals and families. Settlement services were available to people on the basis of need rather than an assessment of deservedness, which was the common practice among many charitable agencies at that time (Farley, Smith and Boyle 2009). The assistance enabled many people to break the cycle of poverty, sometimes experienced over several family generations.

The type of work done by the Settlement Movement is regarded as an example of what is meant by social work practice where social workers are acting as ‘agents of social change’. An alternative type of practice is when social workers accept the dominant paradigm and expect the people with whom they work to conform to general societal expectations, no matter that these expectations may be based on false premises or acceptance of inequity (Thompson 2000). This type of position is often referred to as social workers acting as ‘agents of the state’ or as ‘agents of social control’.

The participants in this study made it quite clear that they wish to be agents of change, and most definitely not as agents of the state or of social control, and expressed some distress that social work seems to be losing touch with its activist tradition. Some participants were very specific about this, while others described their position more indirectly. For Ruby, it is as clear as: ‘I hark back to the mutual aid tradition and the radical community organising tradition and that is where I see my links to’. Melanie also specifically expressed her links to activism when she described ‘the years of the social movement and, wow, I did my best ‘social work’ then, because I soon realised that becoming a social activist had to be – if we were going to do anything in social work about the conditions of people’s existence, we had to be activists’. Melanie also said:

*When I go back over the history of social work – this is the heartening thing – there’s always been a strong activism thread there’, and she links this thread*
with social work’s commitment to social justice over the years – ‘there’s always been that commitment to social justice. Sometimes it’s hard to carry it out in practice, but fortunately it’s never [been] swept off the books – even in the rhetoric, so that’s something.

Melanie goes further by saying: ‘That empowerment – that’s where social work fits in for me. It’s about access and equity, self-determination and empowerment. That’s how I really pursue my values’. In this way Melanie relays some of the more indirect ways that other participants ascribed their belief in the activist tradition of social work. Keisha also refers to values when she describes her social work identity: ‘Empowerment – that’s where social work fits for me. It’s about access and equity, self-determination and empowerment. That’s how I really pursue my values’.

For participants who were worried that social work might be losing its links with activism, as evidenced by the changes participants were noticing in their own practice, there was distress. Athena, for example, talked about her activist past, but was feeling she’d lost touch with that aspect of her identity: ‘I don’t think I have really been involved in those things in the last five years or so that I have been doing social work. I think I have been really complacent. I don’t know stuff about things that I feel I should know about. So somehow, recently, I have come to think, ‘No, actually I am just becoming one of those social workers. Those ‘those’”.

The phrase ‘Those ‘those’” may be interpreted as a sense in Athena that she makes a negative association with social workers who are not actively trying to bring about social change. The ‘those’ may be the social workers she perceives as contented to receive a salary at professional levels, simply doing a 9-5 job, possibly in a government agency, and lacking the commitment and motivation to act out their commitment to the social work principles of social equity and social justice. This comment from Athena speaks to some of the tensions that are discussed in the social work literature whereby the emerging professionalisation of social work is seen as possibly compromising the raison d’etre of social work. Ife (1997) discusses this issue in the context of Australian social work and concludes that professionalisation is a threat to the values and aims of social work. He advocates that social work practice should be based in the community, non-government sector if social workers are to connect with the grass-roots issues that are relevant to the community.
In response to a question about the relevance of social work, Athena elaborates on the sense of disconnection she described in her ‘those those’ comment.

(Athena): Then you get out [of university] and get into the norms of getting paid, and in a system, and I think it makes you become a bit comfortable, and I don’t know whether that’s what social work was initially. So in terms of its relevance, I think it is in danger of becoming – doing good things, actually, doing great stuff more on an individual level, which makes an impact, but not so much on a global level.

This statement by Athena speaks directly to concerns about the effect of the system on the lifeworld, whereby the system of institutions – markets steered by money and state organisations steered by power – become increasingly complex and differentiated while the lifeworld is increasingly rationalised (Habermas 2007a; Wallace and Wolf 2006). The ‘lifeworld’ refers to the meanings that individuals make of the world around them, the complex web of consciousness and perception, and how each experiences reality (Habermas 2007a; Wallace and Wolf 2006). Habermas argues that crises develop at the point where the lifeworld and the system meet, which alerts us to the situation experienced by some of the participants in this study.

Social-eco connections

Another of the five positive aspects of identity among participants was the theme of eco-social connections: the perceived relevance of ecological / environmental issues to the participant’s life as a social worker. As the participants in this study are all social workers who have self-identified as having an interest in both the environment AND social work, the interest of the participants in eco-social connections is hardly surprising. Comments by participants that related to this theme ranged from links between social and environmental justice through to the therapeutic effects of nature.

Ruby, for example, made comments that fall firmly into the social and environmental justice end of the spectrum. She said: ‘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’. Claire also made links between the social justice value base of social work and her environmental concerns when she said: ‘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’.
The positive aspects of the participants’ identity themes revealed an overarching theme of connectedness and wholeness, with a focus on congruence of identity between participants’ personal and professional values and interests – or at least a desire for such congruence. Of course, many different factors contribute to an overall sense of practice purpose, including the philosophy and ideas influencing the institutional context, the formal professional base, client and employer expectations, as well as individual practice frameworks. According to Healy (2005), sometimes these factors align, in which case social workers experience consistency between their employment context, their formal professional base and their personal framework for practice. However, more often such alignment does not occur, which can then force social workers into a position where, as Healy (2005 p.2) says, social workers ‘must negotiate conflicts between their formal professional base and various client and employer expectations’. Interestingly, Healy does not include social workers’ individual frameworks for practice among the factors that must be negotiated, however it is clear from the responses of participants in this study that their individual framework for practice is an ongoing cause of conflict, and hence negotiation, in their employment context.

Negative identity themes
These themes were identified because they were commonly mentioned by participants in a relatively negative way, or were identified outright by participants as being part of the ‘downside’ of their social work role. The five negative identity themes raised by participants are: agent of the state / social control; lack of role clarity; negative perceptions by others; management pressures; and role narrowing. Figure 3 shows the ways in which the mention of each of these themes by participants were associated in their narrative with mentions of other themes. Agent of the state / agent of social control is a central narrative here, which was connected by the participants to all other negative themes. So, while each of the negative themes is described separately below, in reality their mention by participants was overlapping and sometimes difficult to separate. Figure 3 represents my attempt to show which of the themes were most commonly connected to each other in participants’ discussion.
Agent of the state / Agent of social control

The terms ‘agent of the state’ and ‘agent of social control’ were commonly discussed by the majority of participants, and this theme was a central connecting theme for negative identity discussion among participants. ‘Agent of the state’ and ‘agent of social control’ are both well-known terms in social work literature, and refer to functions that are performed on behalf of the government or society that are functions which tend to force members of society to conform to accepted behaviour / attitudes, or those behaviours and attitudes that a government has deemed (whether publicly or not) to be acceptable (Farley, Smith and Boyle 2006). Social work in many countries has had a mixed history of association with, and enforcement of, government policy or social norms. In Australia, for example, some hospital social workers were involved in the forced or deceptive removal of newborn babies from unmarried mothers up until the 1970’s (Mendes 2005). This led to an apology to mothers by the AASW on behalf of Australian social workers in the 1990’s in acknowledgement of social work’s part in maintaining a repressive social norm in regard to unmarried mothers (Mendes 2005).

Other concerns about social work as a profession that enforces social policy or social norms also come from concerns about the role of social workers in statutory agencies, or in work with mandated clients. Healy (2005) makes the point that it is probably far easier for social workers in non-government agencies to act as advocates on behalf of the people with whom they work, whereas the institutional context of most government agencies makes it more difficult to pursue the role of advocate.

Athena’s comment that she has recently come to think that “actually, I am just becoming one of those social workers – those ‘those’” indicates that, if there exists some sort of spectrum of acceptable social work identity, then she feels she has moved more toward the unacceptable end. Given that Athena mentioned this in relation to a sense of complacency she feels she has fallen into in regard to activism, it may be possible to construct a spectrum of social work that sees progressive change agent at one end and social enforcement functions at the other end.

The title of ‘professional’ is also cause for concern in some quarters of the social work community. Ruby refers to “social work as an agent of the state, in its professional form. I am very concerned about who that leaves out, and what we are. I mean, I feel quite irritated at the moment about this reliance on ‘the professional’, particularly ‘the professional helper’, because I’ve just seen too
many instances where it’s really fucked people up”. Ruby goes on to explain her feelings about ‘professional’ social workers as potential agents of the state:

> To me, intervention in anyone else’s life, even in our own community, is sacred. And we need to be really, really careful – if we are considering ourselves to be experts – that we are not colonising what’s right for people and enforcing that without those people’s consent or without their commitment. So, I’m increasingly into what people can do for themselves, and untangling some of the professionalization of social work.

As a corollary of her disenchantment with the professionalized direction she perceived social work to be taking, which she actively associates with social control functions, Ruby says that she now relates and identifies more comfortably with the field of social development, rather than social work. Ruby describes a major part of the attraction of social development for her is that she sees it as incorporating “the environmental, the economic, the social”, which she does not recognise in the social work realm of theory or practice.

Declan also declared “I don’t really call myself a social worker, but I maintain contact with the AASW and I’ve moved forward into the policy development area”. When describing social workers generally, Declan said “I have a view that they are seen negatively, and that’s largely due to press coverage. They don’t get a lot of press coverage, but when they do it is largely negative”. He attributes much of the problem of negative perception of social workers being due to his understanding that “in this state, the bulk of them are employed in the Child and Family, Youth Services area, so they are dealing with social control – child abuse and what have you - and there is a negativity which is taken out of that into the lives of the primary client, the secondary client, and even into the community”.

Tilly also said “I’d never call myself a social worker, in any job”, and went on to describe (in a harried manner) the general public’s understanding of social workers as “DoCS, DoCS, child protection, arm of government, scary person, statutory person”\(^\text{1}\). The role of social workers in the child protection arena was prominent for several of the participants, and they nominated child protection as the single greatest contributing factor to negative public perceptions of social work. Harriet described telling an uncle that she intended to study social work, and his reaction was “Oh, you don’t want to be one of those baby stealers”. Harriet also mentioned that she gets annoyed with “people who think that social workers are there to use and manipulate the system, so that

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\(^{1}\) DoCS: NSW Department of Community Services, the statutory body principally responsible for child welfare / child protection in this state.
social workers can fix it for them”. Lucy described social work as “The word, or the phrase, can mean anything to anybody – from ‘do-gooder’ to ‘the people that take kids away’”.

Freya alludes to some of the tensions for social workers in institutional settings when she says that “We’re often caught between a rock and a hard place, I think, as social workers, because on the one hand we are there as patient advocates, and I very strongly try to uphold that, however we are also expected to uphold hospital policy”. She goes on to say:

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 have to survive in a system. And if you want to keep your job, sometimes you have to – maybe not play by the rules – but at least look as if you are.

Taylor also mentioned job security as a factor that allows the system, or institutional setting, to overtake or derail the social worker’s ideals. He said:

So many people are tied down by the constraints of funding that they get, or are tied down by the jobs they actually do, fearing that they might lose their job, fearing that they might cause some disharmony in the fact that they are a professional who has done something like that [i.e. something activist in nature]. That is a worry for me, that we have those positions.

The centrality agent of the state / agent of social control among the negative themes is a defining feature of participants’ identity discussions.

Lack of role clarity

Many participants raised concerns about their own lack of role clarity, especially in multidisciplinary settings, and some had broader concerns about the lack of role clarity for the profession of social work generally. For some participants, this was also associated with a lack of identification with the social work profession. In the context of discussion about this being only her second year since graduating as a social worker, Tegan expressed some concerns that might be expected of a relatively new graduate:
I am still struggling. I think that one of the problems with social work is we have trouble articulating exactly what we do. I am aiming, through supervision, etc., to be able to really articulate what I do and what I bring to a service that has got different team members who bring different professional expertise.

Healy (2005) makes the point that, since most new social workers are initially employed in junior positions with relatively limited organisational (official) power, their capacity to read and work within organisational constraints is limited, though it is important for a junior social worker’s basic survival. Healy sees the ability to understand the institutional context, especially in relation to formal and informal goals and practices, as a crucial pre-condition for social workers to be effective change agents.

Harriet, though, graduated more than five years ago but is still experiencing similar problems around role clarity:

*I really have trouble here in the unit of other staff members understanding what I do, and the difference in that to, say, nursing, or even what they do on the phone as an admin assistant.*

Like Harriet, Lucy works in the health system and feels that the role of social workers is not clear to medical and nursing staff, or to other allied health professionals:

*People who know what social workers do even still have a strange sense of the role. I am just thinking hospitals, most hospitals have social workers but you can bet your bottom dollar that even people who say ‘yes’- they know what a social worker does – has this vague idea of ‘yes, well, they help people. They sort out financial things or the accommodation things or the too hard basket or the social issues. Anybody who is crying, well we’d better send them to a social worker.*

Nadia also works in a hospital and identified a similar problem:

*I am not sure what social workers are. I think we have lost the way somewhere – I am not sure how or why. We have sort of got melded to the background and we are not recognised as a body, as psychology is. I mean, the OT’s have got a better standing in the community than social workers do.*

Several factors are identified in the social work literature that help to explain some of the difficulties these participants experience in regard to role clarity. Healy (2005) identifies the lack of a common knowledge base and agreed ways of building knowledge, lack of a primary institutional base, and the variation of the primary task of social workers according to practice context as three major contributing factors. The contextual specificity of social work practice differentiates it from other professions, thus leaving the onus on most social workers as
individuals having to establish their professional identity and relevance in the context in which they are employed.

Later, when talking about perceptions of social work in the general community, Nadia added:

I don’t think they understand fully what we do. I don’t think we ourselves understand what we fully do, so we can’t advertise ourselves. Yes, we make a difference, but how do we make a difference?

For some, even the title ‘social worker’ does not fit comfortably. Stella, for example, who graduated some eight years ago, said:

I have never sat comfortably with the title of ‘social work’. Even through the four years of study and in the eight years I have battled with that, if whether that is right or wrong, and I have just accepted that is what it is. I identify as a social worker but many times I feel uncomfortable as well – I always feel a bit on the periphery and I am not sure why.

While Stella was alone in saying so explicitly that the title of social worker sits so uncomfortably, others described an ambivalent relationship with social work and/or with social workers. Much of the disquiet that participants expressed about social work and the role of social workers appears to be associated with participants’ experience of social work practice in secondary settings. Secondary settings are those in which social welfare is not a primary focus of the employing organisation, such as a hospital (where the focus is on health).

Athena, for example, finds that the reality of the social work practice she has been involved in since graduation bears little resemblance to what she thought she would be doing:

I think when I went into it I thought I would like it to be a radical thing and quite counter-cultural at times, not accepting the status quo, and that sort of stuff. But I think a lot of it - when you are working within big systems like health or other community services – that you can get really lost, and so hospitals I think are not a very radical system.

The lack of role clarity felt by most participants was also reflected in the ways in which participants attributed perceptions of social work by other team members and others with whom they work. Several participants indicated that they felt that colleagues from other professions, as well as managers and administrative staff, for the most part held relatively negative perceptions of social work and of social workers. This factor was particularly evident among the participants who work in health settings.
Brenda describes her struggle with a social work identity:

I get the journals and I read what social workers are doing and I suppose – over the years of my connection with the profession – because I’ve worked in the area of health, I always saw a bit of a struggle… I find it difficult to really identify with the profession and what it’s trying to do and where it’s coming from…For many years now I read the social work journals and publications, and there’s nothing in it that I connect with.

Declan worked in a policy area, and also describes an ambivalent relationship with social work:

I don’t really call myself a social worker but I maintain contact with the AASW and I’ve moved forward into the policy development area, which I think still is social work, although the profession itself, I think, doesn’t to a large degree….There is a problem on both sides, I think, because the policy developers tend to not regard themselves as social workers even if they have come out of that professional background, and very few have anything to do with the profession. I have been one of the exceptions.

Brenda describes a similar experience, as she relates more to the field of social development as her professional discipline:

I often sort of think it strange where social workers get to and what they do. I find it difficult to really identify with the profession and what it’s trying to do and where it’s coming from…My network has been more to do with what I call social developers, who, I think, do have a more wholistic approach to these things, on the whole.

The lack of identification that the majority of participants feel with what they perceive as ‘social work’ begs the question of whether participants feel this way because they are ‘outsiders’ owing to their focus on environmental / ecological matters. There are many possible explanations for the schism these participants feel between themselves and social work / social workers, and some of it may rest on the perceptions participants have of the boundaries of the domain of social work practice, and what they view as legitimate / legitimised practice.

Congruence is an important concept in social work practice, and is considered to be an aspect of personal / 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).

For the participants in this study, whose personal interest and values show a clear concern for environmental problems and their impact on society, there appears to be a more sharply defined boundary around their personal and professional self. Participants felt that their concerns about the environment do not have a place at work, that is, in a major aspect of the participants’ public life, and possibly helps to explain why this group saw themselves as having such a low level of identification with the general body of social workers. It seems that, despite the AASW code of ethics (2002, p5), which states that ‘social workers are responsible for managing the environment in the interests of human welfare’, there is little traction in the workplace for interest in this area.

Athena describes a sense that ‘there is always this separation of public and private’ when she considers the range of her interests and concerns. In talking about what is relevant and what is not relevant in her work role, Brenda said ‘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’. Claire 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 see as odd, a stirrer, all those things’. Claire expressed this impression of her workplace despite the fact that she saw her team leader as ‘Somebody who would probably vote Green’, and presumably therefore as someone who is relatively supportive of green, or environmental, values.

Participants described a general lack of interest about environmental concerns among their co-workers, managers, and team leaders. Lucy 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’. 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 feels strongly about environmental matters it’s 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’. These words from Claire infer that the manager of whom she speaks also acts from a position of constraint.

A variety of role and organisational constraints came through in many 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 wrapped over the knuckles and got into trouble about that’. While Brenda says she feels able to get away with more expression of pro-environmental views in her current workplace, she also says ‘I do feel, and some others of us feel, a bit nervous. There is a one-way screen, and if we get watched through that one-way screen it’s possible we could be told we can’t do that’.

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 at times, I think, too’. Organisational culture is a strong force in keeping things as they are. Freya goes on to speak of:

...my impression 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 [named area] 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.

This quote from Freya raises two issues. Firstly, the kind of constraint spoken of by Freya 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, her 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. It appears, as least in Freya’s workplace, that both the formal and informal rules and norms around speaking up, particularly when it is expected that senior managers are expected to not like what is being said, are affecting social workers’ decisions about whether to raise issues that may be perceived as difficult ones. 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 definitely not worth losing one’s job over. Where a particular profession, such as social work, is already experiencing difficulty being valued, particularly in a secondary setting such as a hospital, those workers are not likely to push for an expansion of their role. This is particularly so when 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’s words encapsulate the feeling that many of the participants convey, indicating participants are trying to move towards a sense of integrity that they associate with ‘wholeness’, or are at least aware of a gap between what they believe and what they are able to do in their professional practice.

**Negative perceptions by others**

Participants identified two main areas of negative perception by others: perceptions of the general public; and perceptions of other professionals, sometimes from within their own multidisciplinary team.

**Perceptions of other professionals**

Within this category, ‘negative perceptions by others’ is closely linked by participants with the issue of lack of role clarity as described earlier in this chapter. Claire, for example, in a setting
where expert knowledge is a highly valued commodity, sees the generalist nature of social work practice as a disadvantage:

*There are paradoxes in who we are because...we see ourselves as drawing on a lot of theoretical and skill bases and we see that as our strength, whereas other groups see it as a weakness: that we don’t know who we are, or what we’re on about, or that we’re not an expert in any area.*

Harriet also spoke generally about the difficulty of working within a health setting, and practising within a medical framework when other health professionals have a lack of understanding of or valuing of social work services:

*It makes it very hard, and their understanding of what social work is, is basically someone who just talks to people and fixes it; you know – fix that problem, they’re causing too much trouble, get rid of them.*

Stella has some discomfort about the way in which she feels social work is viewed in her health workplace, and this is partly to do with behaviour she has observed among her social work colleagues:

*If I am really honest, some of my experiences with social work colleagues at meetings, sometimes I get – I don’t know if ‘embarrassed’ is the word – I think it is because it is my style and I like people to be direct and have a reason for saying something. I have never felt comfortable with people just putting out ideas and just, you know, and nothing ever happens with them. It really frustrates me and I think sometimes that that’s the perception of social work, that it has that ‘fluffy’ side to it.*

A perception that social workers are unfocused, or not sure what they are doing, seems to be a relatively common problem. Thompson (2000) claims that some social workers add fuel to this particular fire by not always being clear or systematic in their practice. There may be some social workers who practice in this way, but Thompson (2000 p159) is clear that ‘this does not justify a blanket assumption that social workers in general are vague and woolly’.

Nadia has the sense that the social work role is defined within the hospital setting where she works as mainly being about accommodation, and she resists pressure to focus on only accommodation and finance: ‘We are not the bank and we just don’t take clients from the hospital down to the bank to get their money out, and we can be utilised in a much better frame’.
The confusion among the study participants surrounding their lack of role clarity is perhaps rooted in similar confusion in the profession more generally. Thompson (2000 p.13) says that, at a simple level, ‘social work is what social workers do’, and this is especially worrying because of the potentially significant overlap with descriptions of other human services. Thompson (2000) comes to the conclusion that social work operates at a point of tension in society – a point where social workers are working for both social stability and social change. The tension Thompson describes is reflected in participants’ descriptions of their lived experience as social workers, especially for those participants working in multidisciplinary teams.

**Perceptions of the general public**

Similar to participants’ perceptions of how they are perceived in their workplace, most perceive the general public to also have a negative view of social work and of social workers. It seems that social work suffers from a combination of poor media image and sometimes conflict with clients, usually from situations where clients are either reluctant or disgruntled (Thompson 2000). ‘These conflicts are an intrinsic part of social work...they cannot be avoided altogether...It is therefore important that we accept this and devote some thought, effort and energy to developing strategies for dealing with the problems that these conflicts can generate’ (Thompson 2000 p158).

(Freya) *I think the community sees us as ‘do-gooders’, and I don’t know that that is necessarily a complimentary term these days unfortunately, and it annoys me so much when people are labelled as ‘do-gooders’ and it’s supposed to be an insult*.

Later, Freya goes on to say:

*I think that a lot of people think that social workers are interfering, and they see them in the ‘child protection-type, removing children from their families’ role, and that is often how they are portrayed on TV, which is a bit sad really. And I don’t know that we are given a professional sort of status – there is a bit of a blur between social workers and welfare workers and people who are volunteers, and social worker is often, I think, a generic term used for anybody who tries to help people.*

Participants had commonly experienced negative comments to do with perceptions by others of social work as a form of state control largely associated with child welfare intervention. Lucy linked this view of social work with her own view that social work is little understood by the general public: ‘the word or phrase can mean anything to anybody, from ‘do-gooder’ to ‘the people that take kids away’. 
For Tilly and some of her social work friends, the broadly negative perceptions of social work are a disincentive for them to identify as a social worker: ‘That’s why most people I know who work quite radically don’t call themselves social workers...That’s why I choose not to, or don’t do it very often’.

Keisha was worried that social workers are viewed as a professional group that supports people in the community who are manipulating the welfare system:

*I think we get characterised as the welfare lobby, and the people who support the people depending on the government instead of getting up on [their] own initiative.*

Nadia struggles with what she sees as a simplistic public view of social work:

*People see social workers as those people who you talk to when you are crying, they make you cry, they give you a food voucher, they get you a parking voucher at the hospital, or they find you a house, or you ask them to find you Department of Housing accommodation, and not many people see what social work does and those who do are at the depths of despair most of the time.*

**Management pressures**

The major form of management pressure identified by the study participants is to do with the pressures they perceived as being applied in regard to their professional role. This is related to the combination of formal and informal policy about what constitutes ‘core business’ for social workers. Most participants in this study are supervised, or line-managed, by a non-social worker. There is a general sense that non-social workers take a more ‘economic rationalist’ approach to management, and that most such managers do not have a clear understanding of what it is that social workers do. It seems that in some instances when study participants expect to be able to apply their own professional discretion, they come up against a management dictum that dictates when, where, and how social work will be practiced.

Thompson (2000) outlines the ways in which statutory considerations, social policy, and agency policy come together to influence actual social work practice. In some instances, these procedures can be expected to take the form of general guidelines that leave a lot of room for professional discretion, but in other cases they can be quite prescriptive (Thompson 2000). Organisational culture adds a further layer of complexity that includes the common patterns, assumptions, values and norms that come to be established in the organisation over a period of time.
Participants in this study spoke of pressures to conform, as expressed through a variety of both subtle and unsubtle forces. One example is the pressure to maintain good relations with other disciplines, such as the pressure experienced by Freya to ‘maintain good relationships with the medical staff’. For Freya, there was further compromise in her role due to pressure to deal quickly with clients, such that now she has the opportunity to do ‘nothing in-depth’, and ‘because I don’t have the time to spend [with clients], which de-professionalises what I do...and I can’t advocate for people the way I would like to’.

Marti is in a management position in her organisation, and she speaks of trying to encourage her staff to ‘bring their personal views to the table’. Even from this relatively powerful position, Marti is aware of ‘structural issues that prevent me from seeing my role in advocating for the environment...there are still barriers’. Marti identified those barriers as being ‘organisational cultural barriers’ that were not the formal written rules of the organisation, but rather ‘the pressure to do things the way they have 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’.

At least some of what participants feel they can achieve in their work is dictated by what managers see as relevant to the social work role. Nadia, for example, speaks of the frustration of getting managers to understand what she sees as important in her role:

(Nadia) Does it have to come from the top-down in social work for them to talk to managers, to talk to directors and that kind of thing, so that the social workers who are a higher grade than me are bringing that down and allowing for that to happen? I don’t think people make the link between environmental health and physical health.

Ella reports similar experiences, and it appears that she is adjusting her behaviours at work according to the organisational cultural limits she identifies as important:

There are constraints, that’s fair to say...I’m obviously accountable to a Director, and so he will, obviously, edits and filters what I do. We have a Minister we are accountable to, and closely accountable to, so if there was anything too radical it would get filtered out...I enjoy pushing the envelope [but] I guess I have taken on those constraints internally, constraints in terms of my time, access to resources and other people. I have had to make decisions about what I can and can’t do, knowing that I just can’t do everything.

Likewise Tegan, who works in the health sector, says that: ‘If something came up I would speak up about things, but I am aware of how much you can say’. Taylor works in the non-government
sector and has noticed self-censoring attitudes and behaviours among colleagues in his own and other organisations that are of concern to him:

(Taylor) *So many people are tied down by the constraints of funding that they get, or are tied down by the jobs that they actually do, fearing that they might lose their job, fearing they might cause some disharmony in the fact that they are a professional who has done something like that [i.e. spoken out].*

It appears that the experience of at least some of the participants in this study has been that they, or colleagues they have observed, have self-imposed certain limiting behaviours in their professional role due to top-down pressures. Obviously, there is and should be a high level of accountability in organisations that offer social work services. However, the sorts of pressures referred to by the participants in this study show that they see their ability to expand their role as very limited - for example by delving into non-traditional social work areas, or by introducing environmental issues into the workplace.

Management pressures are closely connected with role narrowing in the participant themes to do with identity, and role narrowing is explored in the next section.

**Role narrowing**

The issue of role narrowing most notably emerged in discussions with health sector social work participants. Similar to the management pressures discussed in the previous section, role narrowing is an organisationally imposed constraint on the professional discretion or autonomy of these social workers. Thompson (2000) claims that it is hardly surprising that other professions have a low opinion of social work given the negative media image with which social workers contend. The difficulties arising from this situation include: low expectations toward the possibility of progress; a lack of faith or trust due to reluctance to engage with the worker; and unnecessary tensions that can stand in the way of effective relationships (Thompson 2000 p157). Some of this issue in health may be linked to the difficulties associated with practising social work in a secondary setting, that is, a setting which does not have social welfare as a primary focus.

Athena has experienced a diminution in her role in the health service: ‘I felt that social workers were just seen as people that filled in Centrelink forms’, and she put this down to her sense that: ‘I didn’t feel like they were actually respected for the things they could do or that they were being utilised in a way they potentially could be’. Nadia, also in health, finds that ‘the medical
profession decides what social workers do and should do’. She wonders how to talk with colleagues in other health professions about what a social worker does:

_How do we tell that to the professions then, what a social worker does, this is what our main role is, and thank you – we are not exclusively about accommodation._

Nadia expresses a yearning for a broader role for herself as a social worker, and not one that is defined by other professions.

Brenda no longer works in the health area, partly because she observed that social work roles were diminishing both in number and in quality:

_(Brenda) Because I’ve worked in the area of health, I always saw a bit of a struggle. Nurses – because the areas I was interested in, nurses were also trying to get into – I was interested in bereavement counselling, grief and loss, and quite often you saw the nurses who didn’t want to stay in nursing, clinical nursing, training themselves up and getting into that area...There are lots of other folk who have stepped into roles that, traditionally, social workers have done._

Nadia also observes also that ‘nurses are encroaching on a social work type role – of the communication, of the group work, those kinds of things’, and this theme is taken up by other participants. Declan commented on the loss of social work roles in number, together with a concomitant change in purpose. His observation is that social workers were traditionally involved in a variety of roles that are becoming increasingly restricted to social control roles:

_(Declan) There is a negativity which is taken into the lives of the primary client, the secondary client, and even into the community. I actually think that has got worse over the last 10 or 15 years._

Like Brenda, Declan saw social work roles going to other professions:

_My observation is that a lot of social work – clinical, but also in the policy area – has been hijacked by other professionals and they [i.e. other professionals] are seen possibly a lot more positively because of where they come from._

And in regard to the standing of social work and social workers, Declan says:

_I think they have retreated. A lot of it has to do with the work they do, too – they are crucified whichever way they go._
Like Brenda and Declan, Melanie does not work in the health field. She looks back on the history of social work which ‘in the middle-to-mid twentieth century you’ve got into that psychological thing’, and now social work is encountering ‘the managerial thing, which has demanded a very narrow focus’. Managerialism as a cause of role narrowing for social workers was directly mentioned by only a few participants, but was implied by many. Athena, for example, mentions that she is always aware of what is ‘core business’ and what is not, as this concept is behind much of the decision-making in her health setting.

Shana has some doubts about the overall professional project of social work and the effect it may be having on the range of opportunities for social work: ‘That push for professionalism in social work gives us a really narrow kind of idea about what social workers are doing’. The theme of professional role narrowing as emanating from within the professional project is also taken up by Tilly: ‘There’s some that define themselves so narrowly in what they would call social work, you know?’, which she views as having a negative impact on how social work is viewed by other professions.

Discussion

Within a cultural studies framework, Denzin (2002b p.27) identifies that ‘the practices of social work are anchored in the complex educational, political, medical, economic and consumption structures of everyday life’. While the structural problems of everyday life create personal troubles and issues in peoples’ lives, and these problems, which often become issues in the public arena (Mills 1963, cited in Denzin 2002), include factors such as de-industrialisation, a weakening economy, poverty, racial and gender discrimination, alcohol and drug abuse, and domestic violence. In this context, everyday life represents a site where power, ideology, gender and social class circulate and shape one another. This is the context for social work intervention and mediation in the life world of their clients.

Some writers (see, for example, Denzin 2002b) argue that the means for social workers to exercise power over this context of mediation and intervention is to implement their individual versions of truth, social control and normalisation. These ideas encapsulate the tensions and conflicts that surround, for some, the identified practice framework of social work. For social workers who work in environments where their frameworks and their context are consistent, there is relatively little conflict. However, the participants in this study are among the many social workers who experience 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 major source of conflict for them in relation to their professional role and identity. Specifically, a major source of role conflict is 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.

The ‘system/ lifeworld’ distinction is a central aspect of Habermas’ (2007b) general theory, and Edwards (2004 p.114) describes the essence of the system/lifeworld dynamic as ‘the changing relationship between the state and the economy in the process of capitalist modernization and the effects that this has at the level of social integration (the lifeworld)’. The institutions of the state and the economy, ‘the system’ – as represented by a growing economic-administrative complex - are seen as impinging negatively upon the lifeworld - consisting of the private and public spheres of everyday life (Edwards 2004). Habermas’ colonisation thesis claims that the ‘everyday realms of action are increasingly organized, not on the basis of the norms we have mutually agreed but on the basis of the money and power that already drive our political and economic system’ (Edwards 2004 p.216).

From the information given by the participants in their interviews, it is clear that each sees her- or himself as an idealist, but the majority have encountered a range of pressures that have caused the participants to feel unable to enact their idealist views. Social work literature commonly describes new graduate social workers as idealists who have a lot of learning to do about the nature of workplaces, institutions, and politics in order to survive, let alone thrive (Healy 2005). Colonization processes are described by Habermas (2007b) as providing new potential for struggle and change as individuals seek to defend traditional lifestyles or, importantly in this instance, to institute new ones.

The powerlessness described by participants in regard to their lack of ability to enact their personal eco-friendly values in their workplace or through their professional social work activities is not surprising given the identified dominance of consumerist values in Western society. In many instances, this general societal pressure is coupled for individual participants with organisational / employer / institutional pressures that range from indifference to ecological concerns through to outright hostility. Bauman (2001) identifies consumerism as a major force in modern culture, a force that has assumed a hegemonic place in Western society. To question the place of
materialism and consumerism is to question what has become a basic value associated with the right of individuals to enact their individual freedom and autonomy.

Hetherington (1998) identifies the relationship between expressivism, belonging, and identity as a major feature of the quest for identity that runs through modern societies. New social movements, for example, can be seen as an indicator of a new type of society. The urge for integration is in tension with the urge for change. ‘Principally, identity is articulated through the relationship between belonging, recognition or identification and difference’ (Hetherington 1998 p.15).

If the participants in this study can be seen as being at the vanguard of a force for change in social work, toward understanding of social and environmental systems as integrated (or at least, not as unrelated), they may also be viewed as being representative of a new social movement as it affects the social work profession. The characteristics that identify new social movements generally may also be applied to the participants in this study insofar as they can be viewed as representative of the environmental movement. One of the main issues in identity politics is the relationship between marginalisation and the politics of resistance and affirmative, empowering choices of identity and politics of difference (Hetherington 1998). Although it is difficult to altogether avoid essentialism in any discussion of identity, it is impossible to clearly mark out the ‘centre’ and the ‘margins’ in regard to identity because individuals overlap categories and it is folly to create a ‘hierarchy of marginality’ (Hetherington 1998 p26). However, new social movements have achieved some leverage as moral communities involved in critiques of social development that can be viewed as privileged. For this reason, new social movements are characterised by Hetherington (1998 p.37) as:

...not only a means of challenging powerful administrative systems morally, but also provide a form of affectual solidarity which allows – through the creation of distinct lifestyles, shared symbols and solidarity – a process of identity formation that seeks to develop a politics of difference and resistance through expressive means and forms of communication. It is not just the rationality of administrative systems, therefore, that is opposed by social movements, but also the supposedly inauthentic, disenchanted instrumentality of interpersonal relations embedded in routinised, often unjust, everyday life’.

Various social movements have had an impact on social work, particularly insofar as social movements promote social justice and emancipatory forms of social work practice (Thompson 2002). Social movements such as the women’s movement, black power / Aboriginal
rights, grey power, the disabled people’s movement, and gay liberation can all be shown to have influenced social work discourses as understanding of social justice and the mechanisms of oppression have developed (Thompson 2002; Dominelli 2007). In fact, Dominelli (2007) argues that identity has been brought into social work through the demands of the ‘new social movements’ discourses as identity politics has sought to expose the links between the personal hardships experienced by individuals located within particular social groups, and their specific social locations. Some groups began by focussing on a single identity issue (e.g. women) but were criticised from within because they failed to address the diverse nature of the people within the grouping. This failure was seen, as reported by Dominelli (2007 p.1) as 'singular, total, or essentialising' in regard to identity groups. In challenging unitary notions of identity, women were questioning the traditional bases of equality that had underpinned social policies in the Western world (Thompson 2002; Dominelli 2007).

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 and Pease 1999; Dominelli 2007). Postmodern theories have gained a strong foothold in the profession of social work and their tenets have been strongly contested by those demanding a more complex understanding of identity, i.e., one that links the personal with the structural or collective elements of human existence alongside the individual ones and those drawing on the idea that what holds people together are what they share in common or their sameness (Thompson 2002; Dominelli 2007).

Participants in the current study appear to be in a highly contested state of identity formation as they grapple with embodiment of a professional identity that does not provide a clear and cohesive discourse that is inclusive of the environment. Participants’ personal identity frameworks clearly reference the environment, and they identify a number of ways in which the environment is relevant to their professional role. Yet the majority of participants have not found a way to successfully incorporate their environmental understanding and concerns into their professional practice.

It is argued that social workers contribute to the continuation of oppression through their practice by directly or indirectly engaging in structural oppression - its institutional and cultural forms that are integral elements in the ways in which social relations in a globalised world have been
organised (Dominelli 2007). At a point in history when the significance of fluidity and multiplicity in identities has given prominence to postmodern theories in social work (Dominelli 2007), the dangers of essentialising fixed identities in professional practice has also been highlighted (Lorenz 2006).

Payne (2002) argues that social work comprises three main aims: effective service provision, empowerment, and social transformation. For social work in the seventh moment, social transformation is occurring around social work as the environmental movement gains momentum. Yet within social work, as demonstrated by the participants in this study, those who are aware of environmental imperatives and the potential for an eco-social form of social work practice are finding that they are not able to enact their emerging professional identity within their social work practice.

Beck (1997 p.103) refers to the subversion of the formal institutional sphere by a self-critical and politicised public sphere as ‘reflexive democracy’, representative of a kind of sub-politics of groups and movements located outside the political or corporatist system, and demanding the right to appear on the stage of social design. Such groups, according to Beck, include professional and occupational groups that openly construct themselves in opposition to formal structures. Advocating for what might be called a process of ‘saturated’ democratisation in all civic spheres, Beck acknowledges the debt owed to the women’s movement for stressing the political dimension of the personal sphere. Beck (1997 p.41) sees the transformation of society as the consequence of ‘collisions and syntheses of logics specific to particular fields’.

The demands of the new social movements discourses make it clear that social work has no choice but to ensure that its theories and practice engage with innovations in the social sciences. Not only would such engagement improve social work’s research, theoretical and practice bases (Lorenz 2006; Dominelli 2007), it will assist in revealing the sorts of disconnections between broad social concerns and professional practice that have caused the levels of angst voiced by the participants in this study.

The angst of participants could also be described as relating to the forces they experience as undermining their basic human and professional social work commitment to social justice. Social workers have an obligation to promote social justice (Zastrow 1999), and participants identified both social justice and social-eco connections as positive aspects of their professional identity. An
implicit aspect of these two factors is a commitment to environmental justice; that is, a commitment to ensuring that marginalised and vulnerable populations are not unfairly burdened by environmental problems. Yet negative factors such as management pressures and role narrowing give them participants little scope to enact the values that underpin their urge to advocate for environmental justice.

**Conclusion**

This chapter focussed on the concerns of participants about their inability to reconcile their views and concerns about the environment with their professional role and identity. The discussion pointed to the connections between identity formation and new social movements, and the relevance of these concepts for social work as a profession. The potential for change can be unlocked as traditional understandings are challenged by new ontologies and concerns.

The next chapter addresses the theme ‘Integration: understanding about the wholeness’, and is principally concerned with the ‘connectedness’ that participants identify as lacking in regard to their personal and professional selves.
If IPCC predictions and those of more recent scientific modelling come to pass over the next couple of decades, then climate change, may yet prove to be the most powerful of forces summoning a civilizational community of fate into existence.

Ulrich Beck (2010 p261)

Chapter 7: Integration: “Understanding about the wholeness”

This chapter focuses on participants’ views about wholeness and connectedness. The ‘wholeness’ to which participants allude relates to development of a sense of achieving integrity, to the respectful relationships required between individuals and their communities, and to exploring options for integrating the AASW code of ethics requirement for bringing ecological awareness into practice. It gives voice to the ways in which participants express their ‘wholeness’ and their ideas about how the profession overall could integrate environmental understandings more fully into social work theory and practice.

What is meant by ‘wholeness’?

In the context of this study, ‘wholeness’ relates to congruence between personal and professional identity, as well as a sense of connectedness with and between the individuals, groups, families and communities with whom participants work.

At a broad level, participants expressed ideas about wholeness in relational terms. Tegan, for example, expressed pleasure in a developing awareness of her work colleagues:

(Tegan): Sometimes I find people I work with have similar interests. So often at work you only see the professional side of someone, and their speciality, and then you might notice that they ride a bike to work and that gives you a bit more of an understanding about the wholeness of that person, not just their work identity.

Others invoked wholism when they spoke of the ways in which they were attempting to integrate their various interests. In particular, participants spoke of their attempts to ensure consistency across their personal and professional values as an expression of wholeness:

(Ruby): I try and be wholistic in terms of what I’m doing and what I’m teaching and that sort of thing.

(Brenda): You can’t not look at the global picture, and the environment has become a global picture. So, it’s bigger than just the individual and the society in a way.
Later, Brenda goes on to say: ‘I don’t make a distinction between my personal life and my working life and the values that I have’. And then ‘You need to model, all the time, what you’re talking about’.

Brenda speaks of the importance of consistency between her internal and external worlds as an expression of wholeness, and the part that beauty plays in this expression.

(Brenda): A very long time ago, due to some material that crossed my path, I started to see the environment as an inner and an outer. I firmly believe that, and experience that. My inner state, my inner environment, is affected by my outer environment. I used not to think that, because I probably used to be quite negative, and having a beautiful environment around me wasn’t that important once upon a time, whereas it is now – and that can be done very, very simply.

For Melanie, consistency between her private and professional self also adds to her sense of wholeness, or as she terms it, connectedness:

(Melanie): I’ve never been very good at separating out [my work] life with the rest of my life. In fact I really didn’t, and often, you know, I think what I was involved with at, say, community level, speaking loosely, was always kind of connected to what I was doing in a way, too.

Nadia was clear that she sees her personal and professional life and values as well integrated when she said ‘they are both very closely linked’. She goes on to say:

(Nadia): Like my personal life and work life, I think the way I am at home with friends and things, the things that I enjoy and the things that I don’t agree with and don’t like politically or economically, or whatever the case may be, I think that comes across, not in my work, but in the way I use systems theory with clients, I think. So it comes up, sort of, in the normalisation of the education side of it, I think: therapy and counselling and social work.

Sam suggests that it is important to keep ‘the bigger picture’ in mind:

It is hard for me to think of sustainability in a little pocket. I just have a sense of whole interconnections. So ‘sustainability of who?’ is probably the question that comes up. All these sorts of things concern me, a lot of those practices that have enormous consequences for the environment, which affects us all – and yet in this society, in our world, we just look at the little picture.

Ella finds that her personal and professional life ‘come together really well’, and in part this seems to be because she is in a work role that incorporates some environmental aspects. In this
instance, her professional values around participation of clients / consumers come together with her environmental interests and her role in working with young people.

(Ella): *I am really fortunate that I am finding a path where that can happen. I am having to consciously choose those paths, but definitely within - it’s interesting because my colleague who works with me, this young graduate social worker who also has a commitment to the environment, I think he would struggle to find connections and [would] feel that perhaps they don’t come together. But I would say, for me, because I have been solely focussed on this project that includes the environment and sustainability issues, and I just have the absolute privilege to be able to support people within that [program] area within the government, particularly in the environmental education, to support and encourage them in being proactive and creative, and pushing the [employer] agenda forwards in that area. And I am getting paid to do this! And I am a social worker! And yes, I am also talking with the health sector and helping them to push the agenda forwards around youth participation and involving young people in decision-making, and that sort of stuff. Certainly pushing it. So, for me, it is really integrated.*

Ella expands further on the connections between her work role and personal interests / values:

(Ella): *We support the [named] Youth Scheme, and they are doing a project that is in its final stage, around young people and sustainable consumption. That is one that our office initiated, put that forward, and that has been going really well. So looking at young people as agents of change within their communities around sustainability issues. So that’s happening there as well, and we have run workshops around those issues, and [our office] will continue to take that forward.*

Athena also expressed keenness for melding the personal and professional self:

*I don’t think that the personal and the professional should be separate because I think that, particularly for social work, the personal is actually what makes you effective in the professional.*

Marti invoked the theme from the 2004 joint AASW / IFSW / AASWWE conference when describing her desire to see the interests of social work as more broadly defined. She sees this, at least in part, as being achieved by encouraging social workers to take a broader, more integrated approach to the connections between their professional work lives and their personal activism.

(Marti): *I mean, the concept is: ‘Think, Act: Local, Global’. I mean, that invites us to think about the environment, I think. So, I think the AASW, as it stands, is already attempting, but,...I would like to see that there are other ways that social workers can make commitments to the environment, so that’s, maybe, not being so narrow-minded to believe that the AASW is the only thing that they should be a member of. That they should be a member of a political party that*
takes a stance about things that they believe in. That they should be a part of environmental groups. What I would like to see is that you get [CPE] points for being members of other organisations or other groups. So, you know, in terms of their accreditation points, rather than just reading an article or attending a workshop, that you get a certain amount of points for making a community commitment in some way.

Parallels between social and environmental needs and issues were evident to Taylor, who believes that ‘social sustainability is a job for social workers’. He was concerned also with the connectedness between various facets of his personal and professional self and values.

(Taylor): *I think we have links. I think it is easy to see the connections between the way we work and the way we consider those people who are most marginalised in our society. It is easy to see that direct link to environment, it is easy to see the direct link to the people who are most marginalised. These are mostly people that we work with who don’t have a voice – be they children, be they just people who don’t know how to use services or people who have disabilities; these people that we work with who are kept at the margins and kept out of the power base...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, it attaches to our history as well. I can see it has direct links.*

Explaining his views, Taylor makes reference to the range of theories and discourses that have informed social work theory and practice models. He identifies various social theories, including reference to power, that inform his understandings about social work connections with the environment.

(Taylor): *That attaches itself to capitalism, to a certain extent, which goes back to Marxist ideas. It is sort of about protecting these things and then if we make decisions as a social work group, lobby enough to change those things, there will be flow on benefits for other people who we work with, people who are marginalised by [the protections that benefit] primary industries we can’t sustain. So, I mean people have to change their minds or we perish, and that is something that is scary, but also encouraging, because if a different group of people gain control of these things that need to cause this change, or a large group of people gained control of the co-ordination of these things that need to cause change, these sustainable things, it can cause change now to the entire world. So there is a big connection, I think, between our values and what social work is trying to do, their goals and missions to environment and sustainability.*

Stella details how she had actively tried to keep her public and private life separate:
It has very much been separate previously, very much so. It was like a clinical decision, it was like ‘this is what I do in my private life / this is work’ and I guess here it is a little more flexible, but I can’t say that I have actively pursued any environmental thoughts.

Personal integrity related to congruence between personal and professional values is also important to Tilly. She identifies a range of integrating factors that allow her to draw connections between her personal and professional self, important to Tilly in terms of consistency and integration. Tilly does not claim that she is consistent in regard to implementation of her values, rather, her inconsistencies make her very aware of the balance towards which she ought to strive, but has not been able to achieve.

(Tilly): I think because I’ve chosen to work in feminist-based NGO’s that the personal is political is professional. But it doesn’t mean there aren’t inconsistencies with that, you know. Like, working in the environments that I do...I believe that you are real in your workplace, and I encourage that of other people, and I honour that of other people...I think that I’ve got good respectful practice and politics and personal qualities, and I think that’s important. I think mostly I’m fairly consistent...I spend a lot of time with my work and, I guess, my personal sometimes will miss out because of that. So that’s inconsistency, like, I’ll give to the political, I’ll give to the professional, I have to be reminded to, both either my body or the people around me, don’t forget the personal as well. Take care, nurture, because you do that in other fields, yeh? How many ex-partners have said that?: ‘Oh, you’re so good over there, but look at you in your relationships’, you know. So I guess I’m trying to find balance with that, and that’s where, I think, one of the major inconsistencies I have.

The search for balance appears to be part of Tilly’s search for wholeness, and she describes her methods for trying to implement her personal values in her relationships with the staff she manages.

(Tilly): I try to make [my values] part of my workplace. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it so doesn’t work. I mean, trying to sometimes get people to think beyond, outside the square, about roles and responsibilities and action can be really, really easy, and sometimes it is just like knocking your head against the wall...Part of what I do, I mean, I fulfil all the needs of my organisation, but I also believe in the sharing of the resources for the greater good.

In striving for wholeness and connectedness, integrity and congruence, participants were generally clear that it is important to role model congruent values and that this also relates to their sense of integrity. However, Lucy pointed out some of the complexity involved for social workers in implementing such beliefs in the workplace.
(Lucy): It’s very difficult, because what my experience is, is that it is difficult to impose values. You need to demonstrate values. And talking about it from this perspective, or something I would perhaps go along with, you could equally talk about it from something I wouldn’t like to see, or that would be against my values. So if it can be done in one way, it can be done in another. I think in that top-down imposition of ‘thou shalt be green’ it could also be ‘thou shalt be communist’ or ‘thou shalt be terrorist’, or whatever.

**Sense of community**

In responding to the question about what social sustainability means to them, many participants referred to the importance of a sense of community and to co-operative forms of interaction. Tegan, for example, mentioned that social sustainability, for her, means:

(Tegan) *Thinking about being part of the community, where people aren’t so isolated, and sometimes I even think riding a bike can increase your sense of community because someone – just a simple example – someone might ask you the directions of how to get somewhere, which they wouldn’t be able to ask you in a car because they are really closed in and it is harder to approach. I have just had that experience, where you are more engaged with people, so – this is really broad for social sustainability – but just having some sort of interaction with people around you could decrease fears that maybe people feel about other people.*

Tegan thought that using public transport in general is important because ‘it keeps you in touch’, and she expressed some distress about living next door to neighbours that she doesn’t know. She says that it is important to be able to knock on a neighbour’s door and be able to ask for help if needed, such as using their telephone in an emergency, but currently doesn’t feel comfortable to do this. She offered this as an example of the kind of disengagement and alienation she sees more generally around her. For Tegan, it is clear that a sense of ease about trusting and having access to neighbours is an important aspect of her sense of community, and she finished her comments on this topic with the statement:

(Tegan) *I guess a sense of community is important, yes definitely, personally. Also, I guess professional values have influenced personal values again [and] I am a lot broader in my thinking than I used to be and [more] accepting.*

Harriet expressed concern about how sustainable human society can be ‘if we are so aggressive towards our neighbours who are human’. At the professional level, though, Harriet expressed hope for social work in playing a leading role in community cohesiveness: ‘You have got a lot of people working not with marginal populations, helping to advocate on their behalf. I see it with
the refugee plight. There are a lot of social workers who are involved in that, advocating for people who are locked up’.

Connectedness is the unifying feature that indicates wholeness. For Marti, the issue of connectedness is intimately intertwined with the concept of sustainability:

I think it’s all part of things, the connectedness. I think, having a social realm, that fits with the wholeness and that works towards individuals achieving their potential. I think that’s an incredible part of the system – I mean the yin and the yang. So I think it’s all part of it, whether it’s about a social environment or a physical environment or a spiritual environment, they all link together and they’re all part of what makes us whole.

The importance of connectedness as a feature of ‘community’ is also evident when Ella talks about the work she is doing to develop a sustainability plan in her role as a project officer. The sustainability plan on which she is working has a number of goals and objectives, including a goal related to human ecological footprints:

(Ella) So we have adopted those six objectives, which are ‘community fostering creativity’, ‘improving wellbeing’, ‘growing prosperity’, ‘expanding opportunity’, and attaining sustainability’. Underneath the six objectives [there are] eighteen goals, and one of them is about reducing footprints. So for me it’s been fantastic because it pulls together all the different aspects of life in the community.

Another feature of participants’ views on community is the understanding of community as a collective, so that collective actions or collective responses are seen as a form of community engagement. Again this idea was linked by participants with the concept of sustainability. Keisha talked about a community garden that she knows has begun operation in her town:

I think gardens are a wonderful thing for people to get together. There’s something very spiritual about getting your hands in the dirt and growing something, and I’ve never done that in a group, in fact I’ve never – well, I’ve always lived in apartments really until now, and I like the sense of community that gardens can bring.

Keisha went on to talk about the importance of the local grower’s markets as a focal point for community connection with food producers.

While participants generally stress the importance of community, they also exhibited some distress at the distance they perceive to exist between the profession of social work and the community as a whole. This issue relates, at least in part, to the discussion in chapter six about
the negative aspects of social work. Rather than holding a respected place in the community, participants gave many examples of ways in which social work is viewed as having a divisive role in the community. In Lucy’s experience, public impressions of social work roles range from ‘do-gooder’ to ‘the people that take kids away’. Freya also referred to the way in which social workers ‘are labelled “do-gooders”, and it’s meant to be an insult’. Freya noted that ‘a lot of people think that social workers are interfering, and they see them in the “child protection-type, removing children from their families” role, and that is often how they are portrayed on TV…and I don’t know that we are given a professional sort of status’. Nadia also commented on the ways in which social work is seen as a negative force in the community when she said ‘I don’t think the community understands exactly what a social worker does. They may see us as radical, as men-haters, as bra-burners, as interferers’.

Connections beyond the human world

Almost half (eight out of the twenty) participants referred to the importance of connections with the more-than-human world they perceive as needed in order for the humanity to operate at sustainable levels. For some participants, their comments were a criticism of the anthropocentrism they identify as being all too common, and others spoke of the need to develop an inter-relational understanding of the importance to humans of other inhabitants on this planet, whether plant, animal, mineral, or eco-systemic. Overall, participants who were concerned about the more-than-human world were concerned about the need to recognise the intrinsic value of plants, animals and eco-systems, rather than recognising only the intrinsic worth of humans.

For Ella, anthropocentrism and lack of understanding of the more-than-human world are both problematic issues. After discussing the commonly accepted definition of sustainable development that comes out of the Bruntland Report, Ella goes on to identify other issues that are also problematic for her:

The generally-accepted beginning definition that talks about sustainability and not compromising future generations – I don’t feel comfortable with that, because it is very anthropocentric. It is very much about not compromising future people, and I think that misses the point. The fact that that definition of sustainability doesn’t mention the environment anywhere, I find fascinating. But it is, while saying that, a useful definition because it is one that people, no matter where they fall on the spectrum of understanding and values, it seems to be a unifying definition. And I think that has helped us to move forwards, because I think economists, if it was too strong and one that I would feel comfortable with, I know that the economists wouldn’t accept that, and there would be a lot that
wouldn’t have done, and dialogue would not have happened if it was too specific around the intrinsic rights of all species for survival and the importance of biodiversity. So, I don’t fully agree with the definition, but I do value it. And I think it is helpful in terms of conversations and dialogue and moving us forwards.

Taylor indicates a similar concern when he says: ‘I think if we don’t do something about encouraging sustainability in our country - especially in our country, but [also] the rest of the world, then not only will we wipe ourselves out, but we will wipe out everyone else’. Along with his interest in the environment, Taylor describes himself as an animal rights activist, and stated that the two most vulnerable groups on this planet, in need of social work advocacy, are ‘animals and children’. In a similar vein, Sam says: “I just see it all as inter-connected’, and goes on to say:

It really concerns me. Why is it nobody does anything about keeping pigs in cages and battery hens and, you know, grain fed cows for goodness sake? People don’t do anything about that. Why is it?

Tilly also expressed concern for the welfare of animals as connected to issues of sustainability:

I think about sustainability around how I live my life, you know, the money I spend, what I’m spending it on, what I won’t. I only listen to ABC radio now, and I think that influences a lot of my thinking and the opinions that I hold because I’m constantly, yeah, open to new comments and things that go on about the environment particularly. I guess it’s kind of an ad hoc journey, but little things have fuelled it, you know, so that it feels like it just grows and grows and grows, and it’s about my consciousness and my place in the world. And again, going to Asia really helped me realise just how devastated the environment can be by what we do to it, [and] also even the treatment of animals there, and how we have such a different relationship with animals compared to some communities that I witnessed.

Unlike other participants, anthropocentrism is not identified as a problem by Larry, though he indicates that anthropocentrism must eventually be transformed into a broader understanding. He says: ‘It’s fine to be anthropocentric – you know, we have to look after our own kind, and particularly those people who need more looking after. But it is out of that dignity of the human being that can come the translation of that dignity to things around us, including nature’.

Stella accords equal importance between humans and the environment: ‘I see that social justice involves society and the environment, so in terms of rights and things like that I see that there is no demarcation between humans and the like. So, to me, those [justice] principles apply to the environment just as much as they do to society’.

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Discussion

Social work is fundamentally a highly contextualised activity. The diversity of practice settings and client situations mean that, in practice, social workers are constantly applying their practice wisdom and theory base to unpredictable circumstances. Healy (2005 p.220) claims that, as social workers, ‘we actively construct our purpose and our professional framework for practice by using, sometimes resisting, and transforming aspects of our practice context and our formal professional base’. A critical aspect of social workers’ ability to deal with uncertainty and unpredictability is the existence of an explicit framework of values and ethics that can guide practice decision-making in a wide range of circumstances.

Social work values encapsulate concepts of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (AASW 2000). None of the social workers in this study made any criticism of the AASW code of ethics. However, it seemed clear that the code of ethics did not capture participants’ values in regard to nature, ecology and the environment. Additionally, it appears that the majority of participants in this study exhibit a broad world-view that could be considered to be at odds with the anthropocentric nature of the AASW code of ethics.

Given that two of the five basic values in the AASW code of ethics are ‘social justice’ and ‘service to humanity’, the concept of ‘community’ is a very important one for social work. The values enshrined in the code of ethics promote a general expectation that social workers will work with, rather than against, community interests. Professionally, community-building efforts by social workers can encounter a number of recent challenges. There is evidence of fragmentation and decline in the supportive power of communities (Zastrow 1999).

The five basic values in the AASW (2000) code of ethics, in the order shown in the code, are:

- Human dignity and worth
- Social justice
- Service to humanity
- Integrity
- Competence

In its current iteration, the code of ethics of the AASW is almost totally human-centric. The only variation to the human-centeredness of the code is that, as part of the value ‘Social Justice’, ‘social
development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare’ is included as the very last point in a list of six aspects. Obviously, though, the phrase ‘in the interests of human welfare’ limits social work commitment to environmental management to the extent to which such endeavours serve anthropocentric welfare purposes. Each of the values in the AASW code of ethics is accompanied by a set of principles that are derived from the values. In the case of social justice, none of the principles are directly related to the value of ‘social development and environmental management in the interests of human welfare’.

All participants in this study were aware of and expressed commitment to the AASW code of ethics. However, it is evident from the participant interviews that there is little in the code to give social workers any professional direction in regard to environmental management. At particular loss are the social workers, such as those who participated in this study, for whom the principles of social justice extend toward a focus on environmental justice. Environmental justice, also known as eco-justice, incorporates the idea that ‘the environment’ has its own intrinsic value, separate to the instrumental value of nature insofar as it provides for the needs of human beings (Plumwood 2002). Harm to the environment, also known as eco-harm, is viewed from within the environmental justice framework as needing attention in the same way that vulnerable human populations need attention, because the environment has few defences against harmful human interventions (Plumwood 2002). The concern for the environment expressed by participants in this study may be viewed as an extension of the social work focus on vulnerable populations, and on vulnerable individual members of communities.

A central theme expressed by the participants in this study was the concept of wholeness. Wholism (or holism), and wholistic practice is a central theme in social work literature. Social work prides itself on being able to work with, or gaining a sense of understanding of, the ‘whole person’ (McMahon 1996; Zastrow 2007; Farley, Smith and Boyle 2009), and this is a central concept of the ecological approach to social work. Forming a sense of understanding of the client in their environment requires understanding of the person’s context, life situation, and relationships at a micro-, meso-, and macro-level (Zastrow 2007). For the majority of participants in this study, understanding of the whole person necessarily includes aspects of the natural world, and this is missing from current formulations of ecological practice in the social work literature.

I argue that Zapf’s (2009) concept of ‘person as place’ provides the conceptual bridge that would allow social workers to overcome the deficiencies of the code of ethics, and would also provide
the theoretical basis for legitimation of social work practice that incorporates nature and understanding of the environmental context more generally. ‘Person as place’, as argued by Zapf, provides a theoretical foundation for incorporation of sustainability and protection of the environment as an essential aspect of social work practice. There are some existing bodies of social work literature that touch on the importance of place. Rural and remote social work in particular emphasises the relevance of context, and extends practice to include sensitivity to the environment and as embedded in the community. Zapf argues that this recognition of attachment to place in rural and remote area social work offers an appreciation that ‘geography affects both where and how people live’ (Zapf 2009 p.181), and with that comes a sense of responsibility for maintaining a healthy physical environment, and a sense of stewardship.

Building upon traditional knowledges, as exhibited through Aboriginal social work, is another avenue identified by Zapf as already offering a worldview that integrates community and spirit as well as landscape and the self. Further, international social work offers the concept of environmental citizenship, a worldview that combines a global ecological agenda with concern for oppression and human rights (Hakenstad, Khinduka and Midgely 1992; Ife 2008, 2010). Combining various kinds of social work practice that extend existing worldviews and which challenge conventional notions of the nature of social work practice, Zapf concludes that ‘person as place’ offers a useful metaphor to replace the ‘person in environment’ concept as a foundation metaphor for social work practice.

A major problem with the ‘person in environment’ concept is that it focuses on the individual, or on groups of individuals. While group, family and community social work exist as practice models, Zapf notes that individual practice has assumed overall priority, and that groups and communities are primarily dealt with as collections of individuals. Current environmental threats, though, require a communal response, and ‘thinking ecologically’ involves thinking about ‘people’ rather than the individual ‘person’ (Zapf 2009 p.189). Indeed, the term ‘environment’ is viewed as another inadequate aspect of the current foundational metaphor. Since the social work literature has come to use the term exclusively to mean ‘the social environment’, the physical environment and nature overall has come to be seen as separate from the human actors who comprise part of its make-up. Over time, this separation has led to subordination of environmental concerns relative to human concerns, and the environment has been consigned to a place as background only; providing the setting for human concerns and activity (Zapf 2009). The need for, or striving for, ‘wholeness’, as expressed by the study participants, may be seen as an expression of
dissatisfaction with the separation of humans and nature that has come to characterise much of the social work literature and, indeed, represents the crisis of reason that Plumwood (2002) holds responsible for the current environmental predicament.

Participants in this study express a desire for wholeness, but it is not the conventional social work understanding of wholeness. Rather, it appears to be a desire for recognition of the intertwined destiny of people and the more-than-human world, based upon an added recognition of the intrinsic values of plants, animals, oceans, and eco-systems.

**Conclusion**

This chapter has focussed on the issue of wholeness as it impacts upon participants’ sense of professional identity and ideas about sustainability. Participant reflections upon the importance of connectedness and linkages were shown to result in personal / professional dilemmas for many of the participants as they try to enact their various values. These dilemmas were shown to be related to the idea of congruence – a professional requirement that participants found difficult to enact given the lack of recognition professionally of their private environmental values.

Participants’ ideas about connectedness extended to the more-than-human world, and they identified the anthropocentric character of social work’s professional identity as being at odds with such possibilities of connectedness. Zapf’s concept of person-as-place was presented as a possible basis for an expanded social work awareness than is represented in the current person-in-environment foundation for much social work practice theory.
Climate change exacerbates existing inequalities between the poor and the rich, between the centre and the periphery – but simultaneously dissolves them. The greater the planetary threat, the less the possibility that even the wealthiest and most powerful will avoid it. Climate change is both hierarchical and democratic.

Ulrich Beck (2010 p258)

Chapter 8: Future practice – “how can we not be involved?”

Introduction

This chapter explores the ideas conveyed by participants about future practice in social work. The focus is on the altruism that is invoked by a sense of responsibility for future generations, the nature of the professional project in social work, and ideas about re-orientating social work through education.

Athena: I realised that I needed to act and I needed to go without. It’s easy to go ‘blah, blah, everyone should be doing this’, without actually making an impact in your life. Because I have heard recently that if ten per cent of the population get into something, that it can become more mainstream. So, an alternative practice like, I don’t know, worm farming or something, and just ten per cent of the population [get into it], then it can spread really quickly. And I was thinking ‘wow, like, I need to be counter-cultural, and I need to not just keep running two cars, or [even] just small things’.

It is notable that Athena identifies the behaviours she sees as necessary for achieving sustainability as ‘counter-cultural’. For Athena, as for most of the participants, sustainability is not easily achievable under the current dominant social, economic and cultural paradigm. In fact, participants identify that one invariably has to be comfortable with ‘outsider’ status if one is to live a more sustainable lifestyle.

Although Athena identified that she doesn’t watch the news because it is too depressing, she has recently come to think that she needs to do so in order to become more informed about environmental events and sustainability issues: ‘I have realised that if I am not informed about it, then I can’t actually do anything. I need to be informed so I can act in a more sustainable way, constructive way’.

Participants, while mostly expressing that they feel like outsiders in their chosen profession, also expressed excitement about the relevance of social work in the future. In particular, some participants expressed relief, through being part of this study, to know there are others who think similarly about social work and the environment.
Tegan: *People have got their different views about what social work is, so that is why your research is very interesting, because obviously there are people in social work who do think like this, that are more broad, and I think there is good potential there.*

There was little doubt among participants about whether social work needs to address sustainability and environmental issues, though some were not sure how. Athena expresses the dilemmas when she says: ‘I think that we need to be there, and I think it is a profession that can be, that has been, radical, or has bits of radicalness around, so it’s in a position that it could do that. I think it is a social responsibility of all people, so I think we should be doing it, but I don’t know how’.

In regard to the issue of sustainability, Declan made the point that:

*If we really respect ourselves, we should be taking that philosophical vision into the future. In two hundred years time – we have to be doing things now about our own kind so that our own kind remains here in two hundred years time. If we have that holocaust event and we disappear, we have done nothing for our own species. People don’t think about that because if it happens, it is probably a long way in the future.*

Others were less sure about the need for the social work generally to incorporate environmental and sustainability understandings into its culture. Freya:

*Soc*ial work probably *does have a responsibility to be looking at environmental sustainability to a certain extent, but not in any great detail, I would think.*

**The professional project**

An important theme raised by participants in regard to the future for social work is to do with questioning the very nature of the social work professional project. The ‘professional project’ refers to the educational claims and practice expertise of social workers as a basis for their status as ‘professionals’ (Ife 1997). Social work is a relatively new ‘profession’ in the Western world, having emerged in the twentieth century with feet in both the ‘casework’ camp (initially through recognition of the needs of returning veterans after the two world wars) and the ‘community work’ camp (such as the work of the Settlement movement in the USA).

Stella mentioned that it was exposure in her fourth year at university to Jim Ife’s ideas about rethinking social work that inspired her and stopped her from dropping out of the social work course, which she had been considering doing up to that point. She agrees with Ife that social work should seriously question the professional project and says ‘social work is too much involved
in the therapeutic case work / individual work, and we have moved away from that community focus’.

Ruby also questions the professional project and indicated that social work should have a different focus:

*We can make multiple contributions, and it goes right from the interpersonal, like actually thinking about sustainability within everything that we do is really important, and taking the idea of sustainability even into, like people who work in the dominant professional context asking ‘how sustainable is this practice I’m going to engage in?’, ‘how are other things linked to the person 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?’. And then, we should start trying to address some of the things we do ourselves, like seeing ourselves as citizens rather than as professionals, so [understanding] that the things we buy have a direct impact on the people that [social workers] work with, the place where my superannuation is invested impacts on the people that I work with...We don’t talk about Fair trade, we don’t talk about the environmental degradation that happens to produce the things we drink for morning tea. We’re not having those sorts of workplace discussions.*

Keisha describes herself as being ‘not anti-professional’, but says she has a ‘mistrust of professionalism’, to the extent that:

*We could do more about not worrying about our status in relation to other professions, but more about what we have that’s unique to offer, and part of that could be about building community.*

Keisha also mentions that she likes the Indian Social Workers Code of ethics because ‘it has Mahatma Ghandi’s philosophy as a central tenet’. Keisha specifies that this is a good thing because ‘it has, at the core, supporting disadvantaged people and working with the poor’.

Shana envisages a future for social work that is focussed on a values-driven project:

*I think we have to get people to think about equality, respect, and think about the implications of that and to think more broadly than just myself. And we have to be trying to get people to think about the kids and the family and the community, and it’s actually getting people to think even bigger than that. So I think what part we play is to continue to help to push those values.*

Several participants, like Freya and Tilly, spoke in particular about the role of the AASW, particularly in regard to lack of social action and what is perceived as the low profile of social work in the media and the community generally.
(Freya) We could be speaking up more about some of the issues. I think I am a little bit disappointed in social work from the point of view of being seen as a body, I don’t know whether it is the AASW or whatever, but I don’t feel that we are very proactive or very politically outspoken about issues. And I guess that is a little bit disappointing, and having said that I don’t go along to the AASW meetings myself, so I really don’t have a right to criticise. But I just wish we could have a bit of a higher profile when it comes to commenting about the refugees and about environmental issues, and have a bit more of a voice somehow.

(Tilly) I think the fact is we, as a profession, at times can get caught up in this really limited way of operating and sometimes it’s not creative. And creativity isn’t always valued. And I think when you start doing stuff around activism and the environment; you can be creative in your approaches. I think that we can all be encouraged to think more broadly, more creatively, get out of the boxes that people want to fit us in neatly.

Grassroots

Ruby commented several times on her belief that social work should have a more grassroots focus, and the need for social work to learn more from grassroots approaches, including this comment:

*I’m quite interested in some of the stuff that is happening on the very marginal – you know, doesn’t even rate on the Richter scale of social work – about mutual aid...I’m on the Board of [a] Friendly Society. We have a micro-finance project going on, and we are basically taking the line that people can develop their own savings and loan services. And they are people who are often very economically marginalised, who in some cases have never saved anything in their lives, and they get together and they start saving together and they loan each other money from a combined pool of savings. I think we need to learn from those traditions.*

Keisha describes the ways in which she is disappointed in the ways she sees materialist values infiltrating culture generally, and she would like to see social work playing a much more active role in working at grassroots levels to counter dominant cultural paradigms:

*I think we could make a lot [of difference], and I think particularly in those areas about the materialist culture, which I fear infiltrates and dominates the world of disadvantaged people. But I think that television and all the materialism in the lives of low-income people just means they don’t have information about how to live differently. And I think we could do so much around that...I think social work could do much more in terms of advocacy, and for Indigenous people in our society.*

Keisha identifies ‘building community’ and ‘social empowerment’ as primary focal points for social work to achieve these aims. Along similar lines, Ella spoke about the difficulties she has had in the
past in integrating her professional role with her environmental concerns, but felt that there was scope at the grassroots level to make a difference:

*It felt harder for me at a management level to integrate it than at the grassroots level, because when you are dealing directly with people you can look at their life and encourage them, at least encourage them to look more broadly.*

Alternative interests for social work

Responses from participants thus far cast doubt upon the relevance of social work as a professional project into the future. While participants expressed a majority of positive comments about their own views on social work, such as social workers’ ability to deal with complexity and uncertainty, and to envisage ‘the big picture’, most participants express doubt that social work is in a position to maintain its relevance and to deal with major issues such as global warming. These views from participants raise the question about what form social work could or should take if it is to maintain its relevance.

(Ruby) *I was involved in the collaborative research centre for water treatment and quality, but if I ever mention it, they’d (i.e. other social work staff in the department) look at me like ‘what the hell are you involved in?’ Well, [I’d say] water is the most important issue in this country – how can we not be involved?*

Ruby goes on to explain how social workers can be relevant in this realm:

*One of the things that really fascinated me about working with the water supply people was that they had all the technical knowledge, the big problem for them is that they couldn’t relate to people - that whole social dimension of ‘how do you actually implement an innovative environmental technology?’ I think that’s something we can actually start addressing.*

Along similar lines, Keisha made it clear she is keen for social work to take a more grassroots approach in regard to alternative economic arrangements, such as co-operatives. In earlier years, Keisha was part of a collective that was managing a co-operative and she said ‘potentially, that’s an area really I could have done much more with in social work’. Taylor also commented that ‘collectives are a good idea’.

In line with the criticism made by participants in Chapter six of the lack of activism in social work, most participants described a preference for a social work future based on a much more activist culture. Nadia, for example, insisted ‘we have got to start to make comments about what we are dissatisfied with out there. There is so much in the papers that you can comment on, so much environmentally and politically and locally that we can comment on when people are being
disenfranchised. We have to have some kind of awareness of what is happening’. Nadia indicated she thought social workers could do this by:

... informing ourselves more about: a) what it is and what it means; and b) how do we teach that to the students, bring it into conversation with friends and in the community? Getting things more pro-active, I think. Turning up at rallies and signing our names and going with banners, going as a group and making a statement’.

Nadia considered that there needs to be some sort of public statement by the profession:

We have to develop some kind of mission statement [about] why we are concerned about the environment on a national level. Unless we have a better understanding and have more discussion and link it to our code of ethics somehow, or to our identity as social workers being concerned for community and society. Society is the world, you know – and we have got to make those ground-up links.

Increased activism aimed at challenging dominant paradigms is also suggested by Taylor as a much-needed change for social work:

Social workers need to be seen to be agitating. Social workers need to be seen out and about. It seems to be left to the domain of students or, from the general perception of the public, to be the domain of students, but social workers need to be seen in those sorts of forums, where people are saying ‘these things are wrong’. I don’t know if they are [demonstrating], but I don’t see them. I think we need to join up with other people; we need to drag people along to be seen out and about in the community, saying ‘these things aren’t right’. It’s not new stuff, it is stuff we have known since the sixties. We have known that protests and unions are powerful instruments of change, but we seem to have lost the desire to turn up to those sorts of things and I don’t know why we see them as not working.

In regard to the future of social work, Marti commented on the importance of activism in social work and, as she described it, activism seemed to be related the concept of empowerment in community development:

I guess there’s a strong sense of community action that comes out of community work, and [the assumption that] all individuals can have an impact, that we can take responsibility for seeing change and that we can work together for change, and that if we can have the same dream then...
For Melanie, activism is a crucial aspect of the future of social work:

*I think we have to find a way of, in social work, to connect the policy and practice, the pain at the frontline, the practice and the pain of practice, has to be transmitted. So activism – it’s got to be social policy at work.*

Stella thought that the interaction of social, economic and environmental systems is important to social work and that there has not been enough recognition in social work of the interplay between these systems:

*I think as a profession we certainly are in an excellent position, and that focus or that ownership or that fondness that we have for recognising how we fit within our society, of course it would put us in an excellent place to look at that interaction.*

**Thinking ecologically**

Participants suggested that social workers need a new way of thinking, one that is not bound by the limitations that stop social work from recognising the links between social work and the environment.

Ruby: *[We need to] start having the debate about the future of the professional project. I think unless we do that we’re really only fluffing around the edges. I don’t think ‘add environment and stir’ is the way to go. I think we need to ask: ‘What are we on about, are we training people to be part of a quasi-state police force, or are we trying to train people so they can go out and make people and communities comply?’*

Shana identifies a need to recognise the links between social justice and the environment, and the importance of this aspect for both organised religion and for social work:

*Everyone that holds principles that are about change, about equality, about fairness, about respect, would have to think about the environment. I think the churches need to think about the environment. I think it would be good for them to be really thinking about or pushing the basic stuff about the footprint, because that is not just about physical environment, it’s about how it impacts on everything else we have: food, clothing shelter, hygiene, all those things that we take for granted. It’s not just an environmental thing, it’s a social justice thing. I think the AASW needs to push that social justice, that kind of platform, and that’s where I think the environment relates.*

For Ella, the concept of wholism in social work needs to be taken a lot further:

*(Ella) I think there is an enormous contribution that social work can make. [We need to ask] what is it that we have that is transferable and helpful in the area of sustainability? I think it is our wholistic approaches, and maybe that is because I*
have a strong community development background that I equate social work with ‘wholistic’, rather than the clinical view, but I do still think that even within a clinical setting social workers do tend to think more wholistically [than other professions]. Most social workers, when they talk about ‘wholistic’, they are talking at a social level, but I don’t think it’s a big step – it’s a step that we can make as a profession to look more wholistically, to look at all of the different aspects. And for me community is a way to do that, because it is an awareness of all the different realms; looking at the economic, the political, the social, the environmental, in that way. And I think our emphasis on process, which to me takes in all the partnership and all the narrative. Process is something that we can transfer that is really, really needed...We are not acknowledging how much good stuff happens ecologically within communities. We don’t need bloody experts to come in and teach people – that might be one little aspect of it - but they need to strengthen what is there, and I think that is a role that social workers really can play in terms of helping the shift from ‘outcomes and projects’ to ‘walking alongside and looking at process’. So I would say that in terms of the transferable stuff.

Ella also spoke of a social worker who was:

...talking about a garden they were involved in. They were in a hospital and one of the wards had decided to set up a garden. This stuff has been done before but it is reclaiming that – setting up a vegie garden, which is therapeutic, it’s environmental because they are growing their own fresh herbs and vegies locally, and it’s great from a health perspective because it’s organic and it’s local and it’s good for them and they are outside. Now, those kinds of things, they are beginning to happen. And five years ago I would not have been employed to come in and do a policy across whole of government that would have included sustainability. There’s no way. So I think it is growing.

Tilly would like to see the AASW take a leading role in developing environmental / sustainability consciousness in social work. Having made the point that she views environment and sustainability issues as ‘core, absolutely core’ to social work, Tilly said:

And then, if you go back to the AASW, if it was making it relevant to people like me who are doing stuff in the field but in a paid and unpaid capacity, who are social workers and linking us up together with each other so that we can try to effect greater change. You know it’s people - massed people can create change when we work together. Well if all of us social workers were out there joining together and making contributions like, for example, submissions to inquiries, co-ordinating action campaigns around particular issues driven by different people from within services as well as outside services because we’re social workers, who knows what could be achieved?’

At present Tilly is not a member of the AASW because she feels that the Association is not relevant to her, but when I asked if she’d be more interested if she saw relevant social action going on and being generated by the AASW she replied:
I’d be impressed. That would let them off the hook because I’d be a bit interested in that and I’d think ‘Ooh, that’s pretty relevant, isn’t it?’ If I, by accident, stumbled across one of their magazines and it was saying ‘Social workers unite together in support of the environment’, and the environment is, you know, about social injustice at all levels – locally, nationally, but also internationally.’

Tilly looked at me at this point as if to say – ‘Well, then obviously I’d be interested’.

Claire suggests that a ‘Social workers interested in the environment’ type of group would be a good idea for taking the issue forward.

Declan made the point that social work has some work to do to ensure it has relevance into the future:

_I think they have to re-orientate themselves a bit. Social work comes out of the values which they attach and the principles of social work – the dignity of the human being – so the dignity of the human being can translate to the environment. I think social workers, as they move beyond the clinical, have got a lot to offer._

**Social work professional education**

The system for educating social workers is an important part of the discussion because of the role that a degree qualification plays at the entry level into the social work profession. Bourdieu (1990) identifies education as a potent and effective mechanism for reproducing class advantage because it involves not only learning technical skills or acquiring knowledge - there has to be an accompanying general culture (Moi 1991). ‘Habitus’, a key Bourdieusian concept, is defined as ‘a system of durably acquired schemes of perception, thought and action, engendered by objective conditions, but tending to persist even after an alteration of those conditions’. Habitus is regarded by Bourdieu as the key to reproduction because it is the mechanism by which regular, repeated practices make up social life (Postone et al 1993). Habitus links actual behaviour to the class structure because he identifies behaviour as the product of social conditioning (Bourdieu and Passeron 1990).

Bourdieu’s concept of habitus casts light upon the ongoing effects that university education can have upon its graduates, as rewarded behaviours are reproduced after graduation. Although Bourdieu’s theory has been criticised as overstating the case for class reproduction in the university system, but his views about the independent influence that educational institutions can wield is widely accepted (Wallace and Wolf 2006).
There was a general consensus among participants in this study that there is a need to incorporate sustainability / ecological issues and thinking into social work courses. Participants made comments such as:

Declan: *I think social work has absolutely got to educate its professionals for where they fit into the broader milieu – all professions need to do that. I believe there should be some, probably elective, opportunities to move further down that field [i.e. sustainability / environment].*

Stella: *I totally think social work should be part of the sustainability debate, and it should be not just a token thing – it should be a genuine component of the social work education system.*

Taylor: Answered a clear ‘no’ to the question ‘Does social work education adequately prepare graduates to make a contribution to sustainability?’, and went on to say that ‘Spending six months on the topic itself would be a start. [It must be] part of the curriculum’.

Tilly indicated that a focus on environment and sustainability must form part of the profession of social work:

*I wish when I was at uni we did more green politics stuff. I wish we were thinking more about the environment, which we weren’t. Not just kind of optional – it’s a core subject.*

Ruby: *Until we bring in the questions, our graduates are just going to be gobbled up. And until we bring in the social development issues, until you bring in the economics, until we ask ‘What are the social impacts of environmental degradation?’ we remain part of the dominant culture.*

Participants made it quite clear that the social work education system, as it stands, is inadequate for preparing graduates to work towards sustainability – whatever form that might take. These views are corroborated by the secondary data that was gathered for this study in a review of Australian Social Work curricula. Initially mentioned in Chapter Four, detailed results from this review are presented next.

**Review of Australian Social Work Curricula**

Of the 39 Australian universities, 26 offer social work courses that are accredited by the Australian Association of Social Workers. The relevant universities are identified in Table 9, below.
Table 9: List of university courses reviewed

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State / Territory</th>
<th>Relevant Universities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>New South Wales</td>
<td>University of New England; University of New South Wales; University of Newcastle; University of Sydney; Charles Sturt University; University of Western Sydney</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victoria</td>
<td>Deakin University; Monash University; La Trobe University; Victoria University; University of Melbourne; Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland</td>
<td>James Cook University; Central Queensland University; Queensland University of Technology; University of the Sunshine Coast; University of Queensland; Griffith University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Australia</td>
<td>Edith Cowan University; University of Western Australia; Curtin University of Technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South Australia</td>
<td>Flinders University; University of South Australia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northern Territory</td>
<td>Charles Darwin University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasmania</td>
<td>University of Tasmania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National</td>
<td>Australian Catholic University</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

NB: The Australian National University does offer a double degree that includes a social work qualification, however the social work component is taught by the Australian Catholic University – information captured already in the courses listed above.

Course information on the universities’ websites revealed that the majority of courses display no public information indicating that ‘the environment’ is addressed formally as part of the social work degree. This finding confirms the issue highlighted in the literature review chapter – nature and the environmental context generally are not viewed as being of fundamental importance to social work.

Of the 26 universities that offer accredited social work courses around Australia, six social work course websites listed specific subject information that demonstrates at least some focus on environmental / sustainability issues. These courses / subjects are shown following in Table 10.

Table 10: Social work courses with environment / sustainability content

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University / course</th>
<th>Subject title</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>James Cook University Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>Developmental approaches to eco-social justice</td>
<td>Core subject. Examines relationship between global and local issues, community and social development approaches, practical strategies to respond to eco-social issues, understanding of eco-social justice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMIT</td>
<td>Sustainability: Society and</td>
<td>Restricted choice between two</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Bachelor of Social Work | Environment | subjects
| Interactions between society and environment debates around social, environmental and economic sustainability
| Identify sustainable outcomes

University of Western Sydney Bachelor of Social Work | Contemporary debates in social science | Module within core subject examines key concepts and structures in social science, such as place, work community, family, power, diversity and globalisation.
| Module within core subject globalisation and the need for a sustainable environment

University of the Sunshine Coast Bachelor of Social Work | Environment, Technology and Sustainability | Core subject. Managing the environment and achieving sustainability

Queensland university of Technology Bachelor of Social Work | Introduction to Human Rights and Ethics | Core subject. Examines human rights challenges within the context of global issues including climate change

Monash University MSW (professional qualifying) | Leading sustainable change | Core subject. Connection between social issues, policy development and strategies for sustainable change

Of the remaining 20 social work course websites, it was unclear in some instances whether students might have access to environmental / sustainability focussed subjects through elective choices as the elective choices were not shown on the social work course website. This was the case in regard to the 11 courses shown in Table 11 following.

**Table 11: Social work courses that may have environment / sustainability content**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>University / course</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Charles Darwin University Bachelor of Social work</td>
<td>6 free elective spaces in the course 2 restricted electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Griffith University Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>3 free elective spaces in the course 1 restricted elective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Queensland Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>12 restricted elective spaces in the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of the Sunshine Coast Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>1 free elective space in the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland University of Technology Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>1 free elective space in the course 3 restricted electives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melbourne University Master of Social Work</td>
<td>1 restricted elective space in the course</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monash University Bachelor of Social Work</td>
<td>Unclear whether there are any elective spaces in the course</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The remaining nine institutions either showed no elective spaces in their course structure, or else listed the elective choices available and it was clear that there was no option for an environmental / sustainability-type subject.

It would have been possible to have contacted each institution to ask for detailed information on social work course content. However in this instance it was held important to rely only on publicly available / accessible information as an indicator of the educational discourse. Potential students search the websites of institutions for course information, and the course structure forms a statement about the focus and direction of social work education and the institutional curricula.

Courses are not restricted by the accrediting body, the AASW, from incorporating environmental / sustainability subject matter, as is indicated by the fact that three courses have done so (albeit at differing levels of centrality to the courses involved).

**Discussion**

The majority of participants in this study express 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 affect social justice. Participants identified connectedness and wholeness as key issues underpinning their view that social work must find a different ontological awareness. None of the participants is sure of what this ontology might be like, but their discomfort with forces that ensure they cannot express their environmental values through their social work practice puts some pressure on the profession to find a way of incorporating this new awareness. It is useful to develop an understanding of what this new practice, or awareness, might resemble.

The findings from the review of the course content of Australian social work courses indicates that environmental issues and sustainability are not a priority for the vast majority of courses. This is an indicator to social work students, and potential social work students, that the environment is
not particularly relevant to the social work role, and therefore not an aspect of professional practice. The implicit pressure on social workers to keep their environmental interests / concerns in their own private domain was evident both in the experiences discussed by interview participants in this study, as well as in the social work course content. The lack of importance accorded this issue by the great majority of institutions offering social work courses adds to the implicit pressure of social workers to not view the environment, or the issue of sustainability, as central to their professional role.

Healy (2005) emphasises the idea that social workers actively create theory and knowledge in their practice. Yet the results of the 2001 AASW membership survey indicating that one of social workers’ top ten policy interests was in regard to ecological issues does not appear to have gained purchase in the social work discourse to date. Healy (2005 p.219) acknowledges that institutional barriers provide at least one reason for the ‘low levels of practitioner involvement in formal theory creation for the profession’. Academic institutions, rather than service organisations, remain the primary site of theory development.

Although social work is claimed to be a deeply contextual activity (Healy 2005), the environmental context of practice remains an issue of minority interest at the heart of theory-building in social work – that is, the educational institutions. As the universities are the primary site of theory-building in social work in Australia (Healy 2005), they have a unique opportunity to influence the social work discourse and to assist social workers to overcome the barriers they face to formally influence both the formal base of the profession and the contexts of practice.

For Coates (2003a), social work must move beyond minor adjustments or improvements to capitalist market structures and growth dominated social structures, and beyond focusing its critique principally on matters social. Such a move would involve ‘a challenge to the core assumptions of the industrial growth model and present individuals and organisations with an alternative understanding’ (Coates 2003a p.139). Values such as: community life as centrally significant, recognition of the interdependence of all things, and the need for people to interact with nature so that our actions harmonise with all life on our planet, should form a foundation for social work thinking and acting (Coates 2003a).

The domain of social work needs to seen as incorporating an understanding of the ecological environment as it affects humanity if social work is to maintain its relevance as a profession in a
time of escalating environmental stresses. Sustainability, seen broadly, is about the interconnections and interdependence of social, economic and environmental systems (McKenzie 2004). Social work already engages with the economic system by acknowledging the relevance of income, and the impacts of poverty, unemployment, globalisation, and the effects of fiscal policy. These issues are included routinely in all social work curricula. This is not to say that social workers are economists, they are not, but social workers do need to have an understanding of the ways in which economic factors affect the lived reality of the people with whom they work. The natural environment must be treated the same way in the social work curriculum – not as an attempt to turn social workers into environmental scientists, but to engage through theory and practice with the social consequences of environmental issues, particularly as those issues impact on the lives of those with whom social workers work.

Social sustainability is a field of discourse that could be very useful to social work as a way of applying expertise in social systems to the issue of sustainability. This concept was introduced in the literature review, but in fact it is a contested concept and the integration of understanding of social sustainability into social work practice frameworks requires a nuanced understanding. ‘Sustainability’ is not about ‘integrating’ social, environmental and ecological issues (McKenzie 2004). Nor is it about extensive consultations aimed at improving quality of life. Rather, it is about maintaining or sustaining a valued quality. Therefore, in order to achieve ‘sustainability’ we first have to identify what it is we want to maintain or sustain.

A key aspect for social work will be to develop understandings of sustainability that are focussed on the social aspects rather than as a subjugated facet of economic or ecological considerations. A critical point for reference may well be in the recognition that social factors are of equal importance to economic and ecological factors if sustainability is to be achieved. As Onyx, Osburn and Bullen (2004 p.218) point out, environmental sustainability is ultimately a social and political issue as much as a scientific and technological one.

Although there is some contestability around the issue of defining social sustainability (McKenzie 2004), it is important to move beyond a contest over wording to a position that accepts new premises are needed as we think about the contribution social workers can make to sustainability. Such a change calls for a university curriculum and continuing professional development program for social workers that will raise these issues and consider processes for sustaining reflexive and relevant social systems alongside mediating economic and ecological factors.
As an addendum to McKenzie’s (2004) outline of social sustainability suggested in Chapter Two, I again note the importance of viewing transitions to social sustainability as a process rather than as an outcome. The Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) (Barron and Gauntlett 2002, p.vi) describes social sustainability as occurring when:

*Processes, systems, structures and relationships actively support the capacity of current and future generations to create healthy and liveable communities. Socially sustainable communities are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic and provide good quality of life.*

The terminology of social sustainability is very familiar to social workers, as shown by this WACOSS definition. A new emphasis on social sustainability will subtly affect the domain of social work theory and practice as links between the long-term health of both society and the environment become more central to social work. There are a number of ways in which a transformed social work might be manifest should ecological environmental concerns gain acceptance as a legitimate aspect of social work. Coates (2003a), for example, suggests the need for an increased emphasis on community health, because social justice in health demands ecological justice as healthy living conditions are a prerequisite for a healthy life.

Social workers might also show an increased interest in environmental pollutants and toxic substances as they affect both the planet and its inhabitants (Coates 2003a; Rogge 1998), as well as increased interest and action in regard to environmental justice. There is also increasing evidence of the relevance for social work of developing awareness of the links between nature and healing, particularly in regard to the therapeutic benefits of exposure to ‘nature’ (Ulrich 1992, 1999; Coates 2003a; Devlin and Arneill 2003).

The incorporation of social sustainability as a core concept in social work theory and practice does not call for a shift in the axis upon which social work rotates. However, it does call for careful consideration of how social workers can incorporate ecological concerns into their practice at micro-, meso- and macro-levels. This is not simply a community development concern: it is a social work practice concern that necessitates curriculum and continuing professional development offerings that demonstrate the relevance of ecological issues to social work practice in its various forms. I suggest that social sustainability is a germane discourse that could be incorporated relatively easily into the social work agenda. Such a discourse builds on the existing
expertise of social work, and subtly situates social work in a more relevant position in relation to the environment.

**Social workers enacting environmental values**

Jasanoff (2010, p.249) claims that:

> The interpretive social sciences have a very particular role to play in relation to climate change. It is to restore public view, and offer a framework in which to think about, the human and the social in a climate that renders obsolete important prior categories of solidarity and experience. It is to make us more aware, less comfortable, and hence more reflective about how we intervene, in word or deed, in the changing order of things.

It may be open to debate whether social work can claim to be an interpretive social science, however the relevance of Jasanoff’s message for social work is clear. Social workers’ through their professional role intervene in the lives of individuals, groups and communities, and they are doing so at a time of unprecedented environmental crisis. Social workers can choose to do so in a way that is ‘more aware, less comfortable, and...more reflective’, as advocated by Jasanoff (2010).

If Urry (2010 p.8) is correct, climate change entails ‘the total reorganization of social life, nothing more and nothing less’. What does, and will, this mean for social workers? Shove (2010) alerts us to suggestions that transitions towards sustainability require social innovations in which ‘the contemporary rules of the game are eroded, in which the status quo is called into question and in which less resource-intensive regimes, routines, forms of know-how, conventions, markets and expectations take root’. Processes of fracture and dissolution are also predicted to result from transitional processes that move societies toward more sustainable ways of life (Shove 2010) and resource-intensive social systems can be expected to yield to less demanding types. There is an expected need for facilitation and legitimization of more sustainable patterns of demand – away from what Urry (2010) refers to as ‘excess’ and from what Beck (2010 p.256) refers to as an ‘insatiable appetite for natural resources’.

Ward (2005 as cited in Shove 2010 p.282) concludes that the majority of environmentally-impactful consumption is undertaken ‘not for its own sake but as part of the ordinary accomplishment of everyday life’. Social workers will be interested in understanding how such social practices emerge, are facilitated to persist, and in how they wane. Changing patterns of food consumption and mobility, heating and cooling, water and energy consumption will need to be understood in order to specify and promote social transitions toward more sustainable lifestyles.
The literature review highlighted some potential strategies for social work to take account of environmental awareness in professional practice. Zapf’s (2009) ‘person as place’, understandings about social sustainability, and Coates’ (2003a) suggestion regarding place-sensitive culture are all relevant concepts that provide a way forward for social work. The next step will be to expand current social work practice models to include these concepts, and critically, as Zapf suggests, model diagrams must make environmental issues and explicit aspect of social work practice.

Conclusion

Participants strongly identified gaps in social work education and understanding – gaps that participants fear will lead to a position of irrelevance for social work in future. The very nature of the professional project was called into question by some participants. In order for social work practice to be responsive to issues of sustainability and environmental threats, participants recognised social sustainability, environmental activism, and thinking ecologically as required topics in future social work education.
Chapter 9: Summary and Conclusion

Introduction

This final chapter aims to summarise the major findings, point out limitations of the study and draw important conclusions from the analysis.

Overview of the study

One of the main drivers of this thesis was my concern with exploring the views of environmentally-conscious social workers about the relevance of the physical environment to their social work practice. This involved also discussing the personal perspectives that inform their views about nature and the physical environment and in what ways, if any, does environmental consciousness affect these social workers’ practice. A further objective of the thesis was to find out these social workers’ views about the effects and implications of an environmentally-conscious social work practice, and also to explore their views about the concept of social sustainability and its relevance to social work.

From the present study it appears that identifying as environmentally-conscious does not smooth the path for social workers to enact the code of ethics requirement for environmental management in the interests of human welfare. In fact, participants in this study exhibited almost a schismatic wrench between their personal concerns for the environment and their professional practice contexts. As shown in the preceding four chapters, participants in this study have a deep and abiding concern with both social justice and ecological justice. As social workers in a profession that has an identity bound to a code of ethics at its core, the participants expressed profound dissatisfaction with the lack of integration between their personal values on environmental issues and their professional, or public, values. Overall, participants would prefer that this situation not continue, and expressed a desire for social work to develop a greater understanding of and responsiveness to environmental issues.

A majority of participants felt that they were swimming against a dominant tide of consumerism and materialism that made it difficult to enact pro-environmental choices in their own life as a citizen consumer. Added to this is the strong, usually unsaid, pressure that most felt in regard to
the non-legitimacy of environmental matters in their workplace. This effect applies to both the organisational context of practice and to the casework, groupwork, community work and policy development that was the professional focus of practice for each particular participant. It appears that it is taboo for social workers to voice their environmental concerns too loudly in the workplace, especially in regard to clinical casework practice.

This study suggests that pro-environmental views and actions are not considered to be a legitimate aspect of social work practice, despite the code of ethics requirement for ‘environmental management in the interests of human welfare’. Participants experience this effect as coming both from their organisational context, for example through line managers, and from the social work profession itself. Some participants perceived their colleagues, for example, 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. A sharp divide therefore exists between participants’ professional life and their personal realm, with the environment and nature relegated to the personal sphere.

The expressed views and experiences of participants highlight the relevance of the conceptual model presented in Figure 1 for environmentally-conscious social workers in practice. Chapter five introduced the participants and presented their views on the environment and sustainability. Bauman’s (2004a, 2004b) concept of liquid modernity was employed to develop an understanding of the impacts of globalisation and consumer culture on society, and in particular on the participants as both citizens and as members of a profession. Coates (2003a) explains the basis of the identified dilemmas for social workers in the tensions between environmental imperatives, on the one hand, and social work’s embeddedness in modernism, on the other.

Chapter six identified five positive and five negative professional identity themes among the participants, and found that participants’ identity struggles were occurring in a context where everyday life represents a site where power, ideology, gender and social class circulate and shape one another (Denzin 2002b). Further, this site was found to be the context for social work intervention and mediation in the lifeworld of their clients. Perceptions of being in both a social and professional minority lead to questioning of rigid professional boundaries and about what counts as legitimate practice. Denzin (2002b) argues that the means for social workers to exercise power over this context is to implement their own individual versions of truth, social control and
normalisation. These tensions are also represented in the Figure 1 theoretical conceptualisation, which shows the pressures exerted by modernist notions of progress on professional identity and expertise. At the same time, the postmodern critique questions universal value orientations and emphases potential breaks in professional borders.

Chapter seven presented the theme of wholeness and connectedness that emerged from participant interviews, especially in regard to participants’ yearning for ecological connectedness and personal/professional identity congruence. The foundational ‘person in environment’ social work metaphor was exposed as inadequate to deal with current environmental threats because the term has come to be used exclusively to mean ‘the social environment’. The conceptual model presented in Figure 1 suggests that a rigid understanding of professional identity, values and ethics is not a helpful factor, and potentially impedes a more reasoned response by social work to the environmental crisis. A central theme in this chapter was the importance of understanding the intertwined destinies of people and the more-than-human world, and Zap’s (2008) concept of ‘person as place’ was proposed as a possible conceptual basis for future social work practice.

The question of future practice and ‘how can we not be involved?’ was the central concern of chapter eight. A concern for future generations, both in regard to their own families, future generations of social workers, and humankind in general emerged from the themes expressed at interview. Participants questioned the very nature of the current professional project, and left little doubt that social work in future should incorporate understandings of the environment and sustainability into education and practice if social work is to remain a relevant profession. The idea that social workers need to ‘think ecologically’ was suggested by several participants, and was explained by participants as a need to recognise the links between social justice and the environment.

Education is identified as the most important mechanism for developing ecological thinking in social workers due to its role not only for learning technical skills, but also as a mechanism for developing an accompanying general culture (Bourdieu 1990). Such a change would help social work to move attention beyond minor adjustments or improvements to capital markets and growth dominated social structures, and enable a critique beyond matters social (Coates 2003). The conceptual model in Figure 1 helps to explain the importance of education as a mechanism for change in social work as educational providers can immediately choose to recognise a break of professional borders. Such a break would be in recognition that we live in times of environmental
crisis, and that traditional understandings of professional roles cannot be relied upon to provide direction. Social movement theory provides an appreciation of the ways in which new knowledges can be incorporated into existing social structures (Sutton 2004; Thompson 2002). Successful incorporation of new knowledges into social work relies on a focus on people and power, neutrality and equality, and acceptance of a non-universal values orientation.

Limitations

There are limitations to the generalisability of the findings in this study to all social work practice contexts. This is in part due to the qualitative nature of the study. The purposive sample of 20 social worker participants offers an in-depth understanding of the individuals’ experience, but not to a broad representation of all social work practice. Caution is required in regard to interpretation of the findings, especially in any attempt to generalise the findings to a range of professional practice contexts.

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

In addition it should be noted that some of the recruitment for the study relied on notices in AASW newsletters, which could represent a bias toward views of members of the AASW. This may or may not reflect the wider situation, as not all practising social workers are members of the AASW. As noted, though, some participants were told about the advertisement by friends / colleagues who received the newsletter, and participants weren’t necessarily members themselves.

As most of the respondents in this study were female, the sample was not gender balanced. Whether this has biased the response pattern is unclear. Finally, as the author is highly committed to the environmental issue, there may be the researcher’s unintended biases, though as stated in the research methods chapter, conscious efforts have been made to remain objective.
Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore the relevance of nature and the broader environmental context of humanity to the social work profession. The research problem for this thesis highlighted that the relevance of the natural environment to social work has, up to now, been left relatively unexplored. Thus, while AASW members in Australia are bound by a code of ethics that requires them to understand that social justice encompasses the concept of ‘environmental management in the interests of human welfare’ (AASW 2000), social workers in Australia have received little direction or education in how to enact this requirement. As the literature review demonstrated, the natural/physical environment was an intrinsic aspect of social work practice models in the early days of the profession, but over the past fifty years or more the natural environment has disappeared from social work models.

At the present time, all people on Earth are part of an unfolding debate in regard to the natural environment. Population growth and more than two hundred years of industrialisation have resulted in varying levels of pollution of land, oceans, and air, habitat destruction, exponential extinction rates of non-human species, and now global warming as a result of carbon in the atmosphere. This situation is classed as an environmental crisis by most commentators, yet social work is almost silent on this issue. While many other professions, such as psychology and education, are debating their professional responsibilities in the environmental arena, social work remains silent. Psychology has its own Environmental Psychology journal, and the Australian Psychological Society (2010) has released a position paper on psychology and climate change. Education has developed the field of eco-justice education, firmly based in post-colonial theory (Bowers 2003; 2005). Social work has neither a national association website nor a journal devoted to environmental/sustainability issues, nor does it have a recognised or developing field of practice that links ecological and social justice.

A central aspect of the theoretical review in this thesis is the argument that social work is caught somewhere between modernism and post-modernism. While there are calls for social work to take a more liberal view of its role, such as Denzin’s (2002b) review of ‘social work in the seventh moment’, the analysis suggests that social work’s modernist beginnings still exert a heavy pull upon the profession. The effects of both modernist and post-modern pressures operate on the social work profession as presented in Figure 1 in Chapter 3. The modernist pressures of dualism, linear thinking and notions of progress were shown as affecting social work theories, values and
ethics, expertise, and professional identity, as well as the societal context with its general emphasis upon capitalism and consumerism.

The postmodern/eco-feminist emphasis upon social constructionism, non-universal values orientation, people/power/neutrality/equality, and the break of professional borders is exerting pressure upon social work. The combination of both modernist and post-modernist forces as found in the analysis explain the feature at the heart of the thesis, which was the relative inclusion/exclusion of nature and the natural environment in social work, thus explaining its status in social work literature, education and practice.

I have argued in this thesis that an eco-feminist perspective offers a unique orientation that makes evident the effect of modernism upon Western society more generally. I have used this perspective to show that social work has been affected by a loss of understanding of the connections between people and nature, and hence the profession has not effectively understood the nexus of social justice and environmental justice. While there are inherent dilemmas in the competing forces affecting social work - that is, social work both as a product of modernism and at the same time being subject to postmodern critique - social work cannot afford to abandon either, nor try to make a home in just one camp. Social work will be best served if it can use the strengths of modernism while simultaneously addressing the sustainability issues that rely upon an understanding of the nexus of society and the natural environment.

A postmodern critique makes evident some of the shortcomings in social work’s ability to address the current environmental crisis. An example of such shortcomings is in the wide gap between the personal realm and the political realm for environmentally-conscious social workers. The lack of recognised legitimacy within social work for environmentally-conscious practice creates a dilemma of congruence between such social workers’ professional self and their personal self, thus representing a potential ethical dilemma. A postmodern critique also exposes the inappropriateness of rigid professional boundaries in a time of new theoretical and practical challenges and understandings.

If social workers are to develop further understanding about how to enact their environmental responsibilities articulated in the code of ethics, a good starting point is with social workers who already identify as interested in both environmental issues and in social justice. Social work can actively embrace Denzin’s (2002b) challenge to address the seventh moment, but in order to do so it is required to develop a higher degree of responsiveness to contemporary concerns and to focus on previously silenced voices both within and without the profession. The knowledge gained from
this study can help inform the social work profession about the ways in which nature and the broad environmental context is relevant to practice, and how social workers might enact environmental awareness in their practice. It is also hoped that this study might contribute to the awareness of these issues in social work education, and hence influence the development of curricula that includes environment and sustainability awareness for coming generations of social workers.

The various forms of knowledge gained from this study, including participant interviews, the review of Australian university social work curricula, and the literature review reveal in particular that social work education in Australia needs to change. Requirements of the social work code of ethics make it imperative that sustainability and eco-justice issues are included in the social work curricula, conveying a comprehensive understanding of the links between human wellbeing and a healthy environment. This will require active negotiation between the university educators and the AASW, to ensure that changes to course content can be made within the accreditation requirements of the AASW.

The limitations of this study, together with the conclusions that have been reached, point to some potential areas for future research that would lead to further significant insights into the relevance of nature and the environmental context for social work practice. As this study was exploratory it can now be built upon with further qualitative and quantitative studies at the local, national and international levels. Study is needed into the views and experiences of social workers from a wider range of practice fields, and undertaking such study across several countries will lend itself to an understanding of both the similarities and differences in views and experience of social workers in a range of countries. A similar study may be conducted involving social work students and educators. It would also be useful to undertake a comparative study of other disciplines/professions such as psychology, management, etc., to explore how they address environmental issues.

This study has focussed on the experiences of social workers in Australia, a Western, developed nation. The views and experiences of social workers in non-industrialised countries should be explored and may offer a very different understanding of the relationship between social workers and the environmental context of practice. Future studies may also look at validating the conceptual model developed in this thesis. As this study indicated that some social workers’
organisations do not support their environmental action, future studies may examine such organisations and what can be done to change their policies to support the environmental cause.

On the whole, the participants in this study have generously shared their views and experiences about the relevance of the natural environment to social work. Their experiences have shown that social workers are unclear about how to manage the environment in the interests of human welfare. The concepts of social sustainability and ‘person as place’ were examined to ascertain their relevance and usefulness as guiding concepts for social work as the profession begins to examine a way forward at a time of environmental crisis. As a values-driven and socially-focussed profession, social work has a distinctive opportunity to provide leadership in regard to a social problem that requires a values-led solution.

This thesis has been part of a continuing project for reformers who have endeavoured, and are continuing to endeavour, to bring change to the social work profession aimed at the wellbeing of people and the more-than-human world. It has depended upon the research and writing of others, and in turn this thesis should be appropriately extended by researchers with an interest in the environmental context of social work.
References


Atkinson, W. (2008). Not all that was solid has melted into air (or liquid): a critique of Bauman on individualization and class in liquid modernity. The Sociological Review, 56(1), 1-17.


Appendix 1


Diagram removed from digital version for copyright reasons
Appendix 2

Are you concerned about social justice AND the environment?
I am conducting PhD research into the ways in which social workers express their environmental concerns, and whether this is seen as a legitimate part of their work.

I would like to interview any social workers who are interested in environmental issues, whether this is relevant to their paid work or not.

Interviews are going to be held this year in various parts of Australia, with the possibility of telephone interviews in remote areas. If you would like to be part of the project, please contact me:

Jenny McKinnon
Email: jmckinnon@csu.edu.au
Phone: (02) 6933 2957
This project has been approved by the Charles Sturt University
Appendix 3

CONSENT FORM FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Name of Research Project

Social work and sustainability in Australia: an exploration of the nexus between the personal and the political

Name, Address and Phone No of Principal Investigator(s)

Jenny McKinnon
School of Humanities and Social Sciences
Locked Bag 678
Wagga Wagga NSW 2678

1. I understand that I am free to withdraw my participation in the research at any time.

2. The purpose of the research has been explained to me and I have read and understood the information sheet given to me.

3. I permit the investigator to tape record my interview as part of this project.

4. I permit the investigator to obtain and use non-identifying photographs.

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

Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this study.
I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

Executive Officer
Ethics in Human Research Committee
The Grange
Charles Sturt University
Bathurst NSW 2795

Phone: (02) 6338 4628
Fax: (02) 6338 4194

Signed by: ..............................................................

Date: ..............................

Please print full name: ..................................................
Appendix 4

STATEMENT FOR RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

Principal investigator: Jenny McKinnon

Host institution: Charles Sturt University

Name of the project: Social work and sustainability: an exploration of the nexus between the personal and the political.

Purpose, procedures and methodology of the research:
Social work academics and practitioners will be interviewed regarding the extent to which they are able to integrate their personal concerns about environmental and social sustainability with their professional roles as social workers, thus forming a series of case studies through which participants’ experiences and perceptions are used to investigate the relevance of these concepts to Australian social work.

The researcher will begin with a purposive sample by approaching a small number of known social workers who have environmental interests. Each participant will be interviewed at length about the extent to which their professional life has been affected by their personal concerns / understandings about environmental issues.

The interviews will not follow a structured questionnaire format. Rather, the researcher will be guided by a small set of very broad open questions designed to elicit a maximum amount of information related to the personal perceptions and experiences of the participants. The researcher will be guided by participants regarding areas that they see as important, and this will be the starting point for drawing out further information from each participant. This grounded approach will lead to the development of concepts that are relevant to the lived experience of the participants, thus allowing an interpretation of the participants’ reality.

This method is expected to lead to interviews with social workers in various parts of Australia, and will form a series of case studies.

Expectations of the participant: Participants will need to allow between one and two hours for the interview. If follow-up time may be needed, this will be arranged with the participant at the end of the first interview.

Data collection: Tape-recorded interviews will be transcribed and then analysed, together with a literature review and theoretical analysis, for the PhD thesis named above. Data will only be used for this purpose.

Confidentiality: All data will be treated in the strictest confidence, and will be accessible only by the principal researcher, the thesis supervisor, and the transcriber (who will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement). The principal researcher and the supervisor are additionally bound by the confidentiality requirements of the Australian Association of Social Workers.
**Participants’ ability to withdraw:** The participant has the right to withdraw at any time. Such withdrawal will not result in any penalty or discriminatory treatment.

**Non-identifying photographs:** Photographs will only be taken and used with the written consent of the participant.

Charles Sturt University’s Ethics in Human Research Committee has approved this study. I understand that if I have any complaints or concerns about this research I can contact:

**Executive Officer**  
Ethics in Human Research Committee  
The Grange  
Charles Sturt University  
Bathurst NSW 2795  

**Phone:** (02) 6338 4628  
**Fax:** (02) 6338 4194

The participant is asked to indicate their agreement to participate in this research by signing the attached consent form.
Appendix 5

Transcriber Confidentiality Agreement

In relation to PhD research by Jennifer McKinnon regarding sustainability and social work, I agree that:

- I will ensure the safekeeping of any voice tapes in my possession for the purpose of transcription.
- No other person will have access to any of these voice tapes.
- I will not discuss the contents of the voice tapes with any third person.

Signed:

Date:

Full name:

In the event of any difficulties or need for discussion, the transcriber should contact Jenny McKinnon. Details:

Work: (02) 6933 2957
Home: (02) 6924 3768
Mobile: 0418 621 553