

## Raising awareness of transformative ecosocial work: Participatory action research with Australian practitioners

By: Heather Boetto, Wendy Bowles, Kati Närhi, and [Meredith Powers](#)

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### **Abstract:**

This article reports on Participatory Action Research with social work practitioners who collaboratively explored the effects on professional practice when practitioners raise their awareness of an ecosocial work approach. Although contemporary research in the profession has contributed to the ongoing development of ecosocial work, there is a notable lack of collaboration with social work practitioners. Using a transformative ecosocial work model of practice, researchers together with social workers from a range of practice contexts met as co-inquirers to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions. As part of a larger international study, this article reports on research outcomes within the Australian context. Overall, results indicate that practitioners incorporated interventions across personal, individual, group and organisational levels of practice, but were constrained by structural elements at broader levels. Continuing the development of ecosocial work requires further collaborative exploration with practitioners, which takes into consideration communities and broader social and political systems.

**Keywords:** ecosocial work | environmental social work | ecological social work | sustainability | social work practice

### **Article:**

Key Practitioner Messages:

- *This research endeavours to contribute to the evidence-base for progressing transformative ecosocial work in professional practice;*
- *Using Participatory Action Research (PAR), this research was done in collaboration with social work practitioners as co-inquirers to develop ecosocial work interventions;*

- *A range of ecosocial work interventions were implemented at the personal, individual, group and organisational levels.*

Increasingly, it is being acknowledged that social workers worldwide are responding to the impacts of global warming as part of everyday professional practice. Although social work authors began raising concerns about the neglect of the natural environment in professional practice some 40 years ago (see e.g., Weick, 1981), the effects of climate change are intensifying and subsequent impacts on individuals, groups and communities are becoming more evident. In Australia, unprecedented changes in climate, particularly in regard to intense heatwaves, bushfires and drought, have caused widespread damage to the health and wellbeing of people and communities, industry, infrastructure, as well as flora and fauna (Steffen et al., 2019). At a time when social work practitioners report having large numbers of clients that are facing environmental injustices (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015), it is imperative that the profession continue the global transition towards an ecosocial work approach to practice.

The need for further research to explore the implications for practitioners who are attempting to implement an ecosocial work approach to practice has been noted by various Australian authors. For example, Molyneux (2010) contended that action research is needed to explore the practical realities of ecosocial work, or else it risks remaining peripheral to the profession. Crawford et al. (2015, p. 595) supported this idea, concluding that ecosocial work is more ‘conceptual’ than ‘actual’ in the context of field education. Furthermore, McKinnon (2013) cast light on the barriers that impede practitioners from incorporating ecosocial work into the major forms of practice. Indeed, it could be argued that unless Australian social work embraces ecosocial work more broadly, the profession will be unable to progress towards an ethical and holistic approach to addressing environmental injustice (Boetto, 2019). Using a transformative ecosocial work model of practice, the research presented in this article endeavoured to engage with Australian social work practitioners as co-inquirers to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions.

### **Conceptualising transformative ecosocial work**

Various terms have been used when discussing a more environmentally aware profession, such as green social work, environmental social work and ecosocial work. These terms have been associated with two distinct strands of thought – one that regards ‘ecological’ and ‘the environment’ as a mere extension of the traditional socio-cultural perspective of the environment, and one that transcends this view by seeking a deeper and transformative approach to ecological change (Gray & Coates, 2015). The term ‘ecosocial work’ is adopted in this article in order to identify with this latter transformative approach that involves a shift in orientation about the place of humans in the natural world from being human-centred (which prioritises human needs and wants) towards a transformative eco-social approach (which understands Earth as a holistic entity) (Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2015; Rambaree, Powers & Smith, 2019). This shift represents philosophical change at the ontological level of practice about the way social work views the world and the place of humans within the natural world.

As a profession formed during the 19th and 20th centuries in various parts of Europe, many of the values associated with modernist thinking of the time, such as individualism and industrial

capitalism, were adopted and are today incorporated into dominant forms of conventional social work practice (Coates, 2005; Ferreira, 2010; Webb, 2007). Although modernity has enabled the profession to pursue freedoms, such as individual empowerment and self-determination, various social work authors have argued that the profession is at odds with developing an environmentally sustainable society, due to the pervasive modernist roots embedded within the profession (e.g., Boetto, 2017, 2019; Coates, 2005; Ferreira, 2010; Ife, 2016). This realisation provides the means and opportunity for the profession to challenge modernism through the re-conceptualisation of social work's philosophical base.

The framework that was adopted and tested in the present study is the transformative ecosocial work model developed by Boetto (2017). The philosophical underpinnings and a detailed explanation of the model are beyond the scope of this article but are discussed in Boetto (2017), and Boetto and McKinnon (2018). In brief, this model challenges modernist fixed assumptions within the profession by highlighting the need for a congruent philosophical base of practice. The model incorporates ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice that emphasise holism and interdependence with the natural world. In accordance with this model, five levels of practice at the methodological (doing) dimension of practice are also proposed as potential areas of focus for transformative ecosocial work practice. These five levels of practice, which broadly align with micro, meso and macro concepts, are outlined below:

- Personal level: involves the personal dimension of 'self', one's worldview and how practitioners understand and relate to the natural environment;
- Individual level: involves understanding that human wellbeing is holistic and relates to natural, physical, social, cultural and political contexts, instead of the neoliberal individualistic approach which privileges economic wellbeing;
- Group level: involves developing communities of practice with service users, colleagues and organisations;
- Community level: involves a culturally sensitive community-based approach to mobilise strengths and knowledges<sup>1</sup> embedded in local-level networks; and
- Structural level: involves action at the broader level of society, including social and political dimensions.

### **Progressing ecosocial work**

Some notable progress in developing ecosocial work has occurred through various types of research, for example the accumulation of case studies targeting specific practice interventions. The majority of these studies have taken place following upon natural disasters to distinguish a social work role in psychosocial and community-based responses, such as the Black Saturday bushfires in Australia (Alston, Hazeleger, & Hargreaves, 2016) and the 2008 Wenchuan earthquake in China (Sim & Dominelli, 2017). Specific case studies targeting other interventions have also accrued ecosocial work practice examples, including community gardening (Bailey, Hendrik, & Palmer, 2018), community activism (Case, 2017), food security (Besthorn, 2013) and social policy (Närhi & Matthies, 2017). Together, these practice examples provide a repertoire of

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<sup>1</sup> Knowledges is a term used to highlight the multiplicity of traditional knowledges, which are often devalued by the implied assumption of homogeneity in dominant discourses.

ecosocial work practice activities and begin to build capacity within the profession for developing a professional response to environmental and social needs.

Further research involving interviews and surveys with social work practitioners has thrown light on practitioner attitudes, perspectives and experiences. For example, the attitudes of social workers towards the natural environment were examined by Shaw (2013) in the United States through a large-scale survey of 373 practitioners. The study found that social workers were no more or less environmentally concerned than the general population. Interestingly, Nesmith and Smyth (2015) conducted online surveys with the same number of social work practitioners ( $n = 373$ ), also in the United States, regarding views about the relevance of environmental justice to clients and their perspectives about ecosocial work education. Seventy-one per cent of the practitioners in Nesmith and Smyth's study reported that their clients were experiencing environmental injustices, particularly with regard to a lack of access to healthy food, unsafe play spaces, air pollution and extreme weather events. Although the majority of practitioners identified a gap in their knowledge about how to implement ecosocial work practice interventions, they identified a range of ideas for taking action, including community organising, training and advocacy.

In contrast to focusing on the general population of social workers, McKinnon (2013) undertook qualitative interviews with environmentally aware social work practitioners in Australia from a variety of practice contexts. McKinnon found that despite a high level of personal concern for environmental issues, certain constraints, such as the organisational context, prevented practitioners from incorporating their personal views into their practice. More recently, Powers (2016) also undertook qualitative interviews with environmentally aware social workers in the United States, and found that practitioners experience a reciprocal process of professional socialisation, whereby internal and external factors both help and hinder the development of an environmentally informed professional identity. While social workers broadened their professional identities by incorporating aspects of ecosocial work, so too did practitioners influence the profession to broaden its scope to include environmental issues and emphasis of ecosocial work practice.

While this research goes some way towards informing the profession about how to move forward with ecosocial work, there is a notable lack of collaboration with social work practitioners to develop practice interventions. This notable gap in the evidence base suggests that a collaborative research approach is needed, such as participatory action research in partnership with practitioners who are interested in exploring possibilities for introducing ecosocial work into practice. The study was conducted in two countries – Finland and Australia – using the same methodology. This article reports on the findings from Australia.

The purpose of this article was to report on the findings of a small empirical study that aimed to collaboratively explore the effects on professional practice when practitioners raise their awareness of an ecosocial work approach, specifically the transformative ecosocial work model developed by Boetto (2017).

## **Methodology**

A research design drawing on the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted in this research as being most appropriate for an exploratory study seeking rich qualitative data. PAR reflects an egalitarian and 'participative orientation to the creation of knowledge' for identifying practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (Bradbury, 2015, p. 1), which resonates with social work's mission and values (Alston & Bowles, 2018). It involves cycling through phases of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Wadsworth, 2011). Principles underpinning these cycles include action, which is assumed to be an essential part of the research process as well as its primary goal (Ospina & Anderson, 2014). The principle of participation means that the relationship between researcher and researched is transformed into a collaborative partnership in that people (i.e., researchers and participants) come together on equal terms as co-inquirers. Moreover, reflection and, from a social work perspective, critical reflection (e.g., Fook & Gardner, 2013; Morley, 2016) were embedded throughout the research process in order to build praxis.

Using a purposive sampling approach, the researchers approached the local social work network within one regional/rural area of Australia for volunteers. This area encompasses one of the largest regional cities in the state of New South Wales, surrounded by fertile agricultural rural districts. Three reflective workshops as part of three action–reflection cycles were at the heart of the research design and are discussed in detail below. The purpose of the workshops was to promote a collaborative raising of awareness of ecosocial work, rather than to deliver a didactic training programme. In the spirit of PAR, the researchers participated in the workshops as far as possible as co-inquirers, reflecting and acting within their own university workplace and discussing outcomes as part of the group process, while also being the leaders who structured the workshops and provided input about the transformative ecosocial work practice model. As the two researchers were social work academics rather than practitioners, it was decided to include and report on the findings from the practitioners only (the data), as the focus of the study was social work practice. Similarly, the term 'participants' refers to the social work practitioners who participated in the study and excludes the two researchers.

## Participants

The recruitment of participants consisted of nine ( $n = 9$ ) social work practitioners working within a range of practice contexts (Table 1) and employed in a variety of roles (Table 2). All participants were employed in organisations whose services emphasised micro-level practice with individuals and families ( $n = 9$ ), and the majority had frontline roles working with service users ( $n = 6$ ). Three participants were employed as team leaders, providing clinical supervision to staff employed in those roles. Although 10 participants commenced the project, one withdrew in the early phase of the project for personal reasons. Only two participants had prior knowledge and/or experience of an ecosocial work approach to practice, and all were interested in acquiring new knowledge.

**Table 1.** Practitioners' contexts of practice.

Practice context	Number of participants
Mental health	3
Child and family practice	3
Hospital social work	1
Multicultural social work	1
Eldercare	1

**Table 2.** Practitioners' roles.

Primary practice role	Number of participants
Clinician/counsellor	5
Team leader <sup>a</sup>	3
Group facilitator and project officer <sup>b</sup>	1

<sup>a</sup> Practitioners employed as team leaders provided clinical supervision to counsellors and support workers.

<sup>b</sup> The practitioner employed as a group facilitator and project officer had two separate roles – one involving the facilitation of therapeutic groups, and the other involving working with organisations and service users to facilitate recent policy change.

### Action reflection cycles and data generation

Methods of data generation consisted of three reflective workshops to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions at the workplace. Participants were guided through the five levels of Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial work model described above, as a framework for developing interventions. The workshops took place in a face-to-face format across a three-month period and consisted of three reflective cycles. The first action–reflection cycle in Workshop one included an introduction and orientation to ecosocial work, followed by active reflection of past and/or current ecosocial work interventions. Practitioners then developed prospective interventions for trial and experimentation at their workplaces. The second action–reflection cycle occurred in Workshop two when practitioners critically reflected and reported on their experiences from implementing the interventions they had identified and planned in the previous workshop, and planned any changes or new interventions as a result of their shared reflections and ideas. The third action–reflection cycle occurred in Workshop three when the same process occurred, i.e., practitioners critically reflected and reported on their experiences from implementing ongoing interventions that had been identified and planned in the previous workshops. Practitioners were guided through a process of critical reflection, which is integral to transformative ecosocial work (Boetto, 2019), and in Workshops two and three were asked a series of six questions:

- What has changed in relation to your practice since we last met?
- What interventions/strategies (if any) did you try?
- What factors helped or hindered you from implementing the ecosocial work interventions/strategy(ies)?
- What issues impacted your experience?
- What knowledge or theory could help address the barriers and issues experienced?
- How would you go about improving your ecosocial work practice interventions/strategy(ies) the next time?

As part of PAR, practitioners were encouraged to generate data and collaboratively analyse outcomes by undertaking tasks involved in the planning of practice activities, reporting back to the group about practice experiences and the reviewing of the data after it was collated. Group discussions in the workshops consisted of a range of data-generation techniques, including meeting minutes, brainstorming activities and reflective–practice exercises. Data generated from the workshops were checked by participants, and then de-identified for further analyses by the researchers. The de-identified data were then analysed according to thematic analysis processes, consisting of open coding, axial coding and selective coding (Ezzy, 2002), and shared again with the participants for checking and review.

## **Results**

Practitioners developed and implemented a range of ecosocial work interventions, reported below in accordance with the five levels of practice outlined in the transformative ecosocial work model (Boetto, 2017): personal, individual, group, community, and structural.

### **Personal level: Developing the ‘self’**

Practitioners developed the personal dimension of how they understood and relate to the natural environment through the development of environmentally informed interventions in their private lives. These interventions involved outdoor activities, such as composting, landscaping and growing vegetables ( $n = 4$ ), recycling activities ( $n = 3$ ), and indoor household activities aimed at reducing carbon footprints, such as reducing electricity consumption ( $n = 2$ ). Additionally, practitioners also made efforts to increase awareness of environmental issues, such as downloading ethical shopping applications ( $n = 2$ ), and making an effort to increase exposure to the natural environment ( $n = 1$ ). For example, one practitioner went for an eight-kilometre walk with her father, which was the first time she had accompanied him on his daily walks. The practitioner reported the positive impact this activity had on her emotional wellbeing and relationship with her father.

Interestingly, the two practitioners who identified as having prior knowledge and experience in ecosocial work did not comment on their own personal interventions. In total, seven out of nine practitioners shared their experiences about the implementation of personal ecosocial work interventions during the second workshop, and one out of nine referred to a continued effort of personal ecosocial work interventions during the third workshop. This reflects a shift in focus by practitioners from the personal level at the beginning of the project towards work-based interventions at the end of the project.

### **Individual level: Holistic approach to working with individuals**

Four out of ten practitioners introduced the natural environment into practice with individuals during the life of the project. Of the interventions developed, three involved undertaking activities outdoors that had usually occurred indoors. These included conducting outdoor counselling sessions with service users ( $n = 2$ ) and outdoor supervision sessions with staff ( $n = 1$ ). Other interventions occurring outdoors involved interaction with the natural environment, such as creating a calming place in the backyard for increasing emotional

regulation for a young person ( $n = 1$ ), and constructing an outdoor greenhouse to engage with a family ( $n = 1$ ). Indoor interventions involved bringing the natural environment inside to facilitate mindfulness ( $n = 1$ ), using metaphors about trees to strengthen relationships within a family ( $n = 1$ ), and developing self-care interventions that integrate the natural environment as part of staff supervision ( $n = 1$ ).

For example, one practitioner integrated nature as part of counselling with a young person (12 years old) diagnosed with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). The young person was experiencing difficulties in regulating her emotions, particularly anger, and as a consequence the police had been called to the household on several occasions due to violent acts towards family members. The practitioner and young person created 'a place' in the backyard garden for her to escape to when her emotions became overwhelming. The intervention was supported by her father who prompted his daughter to go to her 'place' in the garden when she was unable to initiate this process herself. The practitioner reported this intervention to be successful in de-escalating the violence in the household, having a positive impact on the young person and other members of her family.

Group level: Communities of practice and organisational change

Practitioners implemented a range of ecosocial work interventions at the group and organisational levels of practice, including groups with service users, groups with colleagues and actions for promoting organisational change.

Three practitioners developed group-based interventions with *service-users*. These three practitioners had opportunities within their role descriptions to undertake group work, compared with other practitioners whose roles were strictly counselling or focused on team leadership. Group-based activities with service-users involved updating existing group-based programmes to promote sustainable living or integrate aspects of the natural environment ( $n = 4$ ), and the creation of an outdoor group-based mindfulness programme ( $n = 1$ ). For example, one practitioner revised a living-skills programme for people experiencing mental health issues by incorporating sustainable living practices, such as making cleaning products consisting of baking soda and vinegar.

Six out of nine practitioners implemented group-based interventions with *colleagues*. These interventions consisted of formal and informal approaches to sharing information about environmental sustainability. Formal interventions involved facilitating in-service training about ecosocial work ( $n = 2$ ), undertaking activities as part of team meetings, such as nature-based mindfulness exercises with staff ( $n = 2$ ), discussing ecosocial work as part of supervision ( $n = 1$ ), and developing indigenous, culturally appropriate ways for using natural resources of spiritual significance in group activities ( $n = 1$ ). Informal interventions involved the initiation of conversations with colleagues ( $n = 3$ ), for example referring to World Social Work Day as an opportunity to discuss the year's theme of environmental sustainability.

One practitioner facilitated an in-service workshop about sustainability and the natural environment within a mental health organisation. Thirty staff from a range of disciplines attended, as well as some service-users. The workshop occurred at the same time as a bushfire

was raging some distance away on the southern coastline of Australia which destroyed 60 homes and caused multiple injuries and health issues. The practitioner was able to use this event as an example of the disproportionate impacts extreme weather events have on disadvantaged groups, with particular emphasis on mental health. Overall, the practitioner reported receiving positive responses from the attendees, as well as a ripple effect of communications over the next several weeks as part of ongoing activities undertaken by staff and service users.

Seven out of nine practitioners implemented ecosocial work interventions that focused on *organisational change*. These interventions involved introducing sustainable practices at the workplace, such as the recycling and composting of waste ( $n = 5$ ). Interventions also involved discussions with key persons in order to influence environmental change within the organisation, such as with managers and as a part of committee meetings ( $n = 6$ ). For example, one practitioner successfully applied for membership on an organisational committee responsible for overseeing a new hospital extension. The practitioner became the first social worker on the committee and detailed plans for recommending the development of on-site access to the natural environment as part of the recovery process for service users.

Community level: Culturally sensitive, community-based approaches

Ecosocial work interventions at the community level of practice were not developed or implemented by any of the practitioners. They did, however, discuss issues relevant to the community level of practice. For example, one practitioner reflected on a flood in 2012 that prevented people with chronic health conditions from accessing life-saving treatment at the local hospital. Another practitioner reflected on the effect the flood had on people with mental health conditions, particularly problems encountered during evacuation procedures. The absence of interventions developed at the community level of practice relative to other levels is considered in more detail in the discussion section.

Structural level: Social and political action

Although practitioners recognised the significance of structural dimensions associated with the impacts of environmental decline and climate change, they did not develop or implement ecosocial work interventions at this level. The lack of interventions developed at the structural level of practice is considered in the discussion section.

Barriers to ecosocial practice

A range of barriers were identified by practitioners that inhibited them from being able to implement ecosocial work interventions or that prevented the full realisation of interventions (Table 3). In response to an open-ended question, participants were able to list more than one barrier. The most commonly identified barrier related to organisational attributes, including restrictive organisational contracts and role descriptions. Eight distinct organisational barriers were listed 12 times by the nine participants (Table 3). This was followed by lack of knowledge within the profession, with four types of barriers listed 10 times by nine participants. The remaining two barriers – impact of prior experiences of service users, and general societal attitudes – were each listed by a different participant.

**Table 3.** Barriers to implementing ecosocial interventions.

Barriers	Factors
Organisational attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Restrictive organisational contracts and role descriptions</li><li>• Lack of financial resources and time</li><li>• Large offices and fragmented teams</li><li>• Lack of organisational approach and policy</li><li>• Part-time work and limited access to team structures and communication processes</li><li>• Negative attitudes of colleagues</li><li>• Services do not have a holistic model of practice, and emphasise medical diagnosis</li><li>• Position in organisation being powerless to create change</li></ul>
Knowledge within social work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Lack of practitioner ecological awareness and knowledge</li><li>• Lack of professional development and training</li><li>• Lack of evidence-base and history within profession</li><li>• Perceptions of ‘professionalism’ that are not inclusive of outdoor activities and the natural environment</li></ul>
Service user experience	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Environmental trauma experienced by service users inhibit willingness to associate with natural environment for example survivors of sexual assault and refugees/asylum seekers</li></ul>
Societal attitudes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Society mostly views the natural environment as separate to humans, and therefore does not consider sustainability and the natural environment as relevant to health and wellbeing</li></ul>

### Enablers of ecosocial practice

In contrast, there were factors that facilitated the implementation of ecosocial work interventions. Similar to the findings for barriers, organisational attributes were listed most often as enablers ( $n = 4$ ), for example flexibility associated with having smaller teams. Communication and positive relationships were also important ( $n = 3$ ), as was having a strategic ecological ‘lens’ or approach to practice ( $n = 2$ ) (Table 4).

**Table 4.** Enablers facilitating ecosocial interventions.

Enablers	Factors
Organisational attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Smaller organisations are more conducive to being flexible</li><li>• Small teams facilitate communication, and encourage close and positive relationships</li><li>• Some positions have scope within the role description, which enables creativity</li><li>• Positions with specific community development activities allow more scope for ecosocial interventions</li></ul>
Positive relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Finding like-minded colleagues</li><li>• Having positive relationships with management</li><li>• Having a strong reputation, recognised experience and/or being a long-term employee within organisation</li></ul>
Approach to practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Being ecologically mindful, and taking advantage of unplanned opportunities that arise in practice</li><li>• Being strategic and having a planned approach when implementing interventions</li></ul>

### Application of knowledge and theory

As part of the critical reflective process, practitioners were asked what theories and ideas were relevant to their experiences of trying to implement ecosocial work interventions. Four out of

nine practitioners identified specific knowledge and theories in relation to ecosocial work interventions and issues. Many of the theories identified have been associated in the literature with ecosocial work, such as the person-in-environment perspective and systems theory (Philip & Reisch, 2015), human rights framework (Ife, 2016) and Indigenous and culturally diverse knowledges (Kime, Boetto & Bell, 2018). One practitioner argued that even though human rights is an underpinning principle in social work, 'third-generation human rights' emphasising community and collective rights, such as access to a healthy environment, is lacking. This practitioner was referring to the human rights framework often explored in Australian social work education and relating to the three waves of human rights by such authors as Jim Ife (2012, 2016). The dominance of first- and second-generation human rights, although important, reflects individual conceptualisations of rights that are not adequate in the current context of climate change. Another practitioner referred to project management skills, particularly with regard to team leadership for undertaking a strategic and planned approach for developing innovative ecosocial work interventions at the workplace. This practitioner argued that project management is not central to social work, but could be useful for implementing ecosocial work interventions within organisations.

## **Discussion**

As a small, short-term project over a three-month period involving only three reflective cycles in one regional area of Australia, there were many limitations to this study. The short time frame is perhaps the strongest limitation in that only those changes that could be attempted within the three months could be identified. There was also no possibility within the scope of this study to evaluate whether the interventions that emerged would be sustained. Further, as all the participants came from the same regional area, there is no way of knowing whether the region itself, with its close links to agriculture and awareness of the environment, meant that organisations employing social workers are more open to notions of sustainability than are those in larger metropolitan areas which is where the majority of social workers in Australia are employed. It is also possible that the practitioners themselves were more open to engaging with ecosocial work interventions, though, at the onset of the project, only two out of nine participants had ever engaged in such approaches. Moreover, although the participants represented diverse cultural backgrounds, there were no known Australian Aboriginal people involved in the study. The incorporation of Australian Aboriginal and Indigenous worldviews is critical for the development of Australian ecosocial work, particularly in relation to holistic and interdependent conceptualisations of the natural world, as well as sustainable strategies that might be applicable to social work and the wider society.

Notwithstanding these limitations, overall, the results suggest that, within the parameters of their positions, the participants, most of whom had no prior knowledge of ecosocial work, were able to shift the focus of their practice to develop a range of interventions that promote sustainability and enhance human wellbeing. These interventions encompassed the personal (self), individual, group, and organisational levels of practice. Practitioners promoted social values, adopted leadership responsibilities, became advocates for change among colleagues, and educators about sustainability at the workplace. They were self-reflective and critically reflexive in their practice. Furthermore, the practitioners were 'doers' and sought change through action-oriented and practical interventions. These themes encompass use of 'self', values, skills and interventions,

and represent many of the attributes that embody what it means to be a social worker (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2018).

One of the main themes to emerge over the course of the three workshops was the importance of adopting an ecological lens. By being ecologically mindful, practitioners were able to identify opportunities to enact environmental awareness that might not have otherwise been acknowledged. Participants took opportunities where possible to raise issues, forge new relationships and offer ideas at meetings. Sometimes these actions or interventions were seen as unconventional by staff at the workplace, at other times they were perceived as refreshing and innovative. It is possible that the project's attention to the personal level of practice, emphasising aspects of identity regarding their connectedness with nature, encouraged the development of an ecological lens at the workplace. Given the intersection between the personal and professional 'self', it could be argued that practitioners who are personally aware of the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural world are more likely to incorporate the natural environment into practice (Boetto, 2017; Powers, 2016). This notion is further supported by proponents of ecofeminism (Norton, 2012), deep ecology (Besthorn, 2002) and Indigenous worldviews (Baskin, 2015). This merging of the personal and professional self in relation to ecosocial work requires further exploration as a potential way forward for advancing ecosocial work.

While the participants generated interventions at the personal, individual and group levels of practice, there was no attempt to adopt interventions targeting community and structural levels of practice. It is possible that the relatively short time-frame of the research may have impeded consideration of the community and structural levels of practice, as there was evidence of movement from developing personal interventions in the first action–reflection cycle to generating individual- and group-level interventions in the second and third cycles. Additionally, participants commented that their practice focus with individuals and groups restricted their capacity to consider broader levels of practice, even though they were aware of the importance of macro issues. Nevertheless, given the political dimensions of environmental decline and climate change, action at the meso and macro levels of practice is vital for effective ecosocial work (Boetto, 2016). Närhi and Matthies (2018) also emphasised the need to move beyond addressing individual- and family-level problems, and highlighted the symbiotic relationship between ecosocial and structural approaches that pay attention to socio-economic and political factors. The absence of interventions developed at the community and structural levels of practice indicates the need for further longitudinal research focusing on the integration of community- and structural-based interventions in ecosocial work practice.

The practitioners in the study drew from a range of established theories within the profession to inform their approach to ecosocial work. However, although some practitioners identified theories relevant to the implementation of ecosocial work interventions, other practitioners appeared to have difficulty with this process. Interestingly, the practitioners had not undertaken any coursework in their undergraduate degrees that was concerned with ecosocial work, which may have made the application of theory to practice challenging. Practitioners who applied existing knowledge and theories demonstrated the capacity to critically reflect on their own practice and accepted a leadership role within the group. This group process developed collective

learning among practitioners and suggests the need to foster professional communities of practice whereby social workers come together to share in learning about ecosocial work.

Organisations were identified as the most important influence, both as a barrier to and an enabler for implementing ecosocial work interventions. One of the most challenging issues for the practitioners was that they were employed in organisations where environmental sustainability and the natural environment were not seen as core business, nor indeed as having anything to do with practice. Other organisational constraints included restrictive, short-term funding contracts that defined core daily activities and expected outcomes. Given the context of competitive tendering for government funding, practitioners expressed uncertainty and unwillingness to deviate from funding requirements. These organisational attributes relating to contractual funding, tendering processes and primary foci areas were also identified as barriers in an Australian study that explored the adaptive capacity of community organisations in response to natural disasters (Mallon, Hamilton, Black, Beem, & Abs, 2013). Thus, a major finding of the study is the need for greater flexibility regarding funding contracts to allow for participation in disaster recovery efforts. Similarly, in the case of ecosocial work, there is a need for policy to acknowledge the integral role that social workers play in addressing environmental and social problems, particularly with regard to environmental injustice.

Despite these challenges, a range of organisational enablers were identified that facilitated the implementation of ecosocial work interventions, including positive relationships with managers and colleagues, flexible role descriptions, relatively small size of the organisation, a strategic and purposeful approach, and ecological mindfulness. These factors represent a way for moving forward with the development of ecosocial work. Further research to explore these areas and consideration of ways to amplify these factors in the workplace are needed. In addition, research exploring the application of ecosocial work at community and structural levels of practice is needed to address the gaps evident in the outcomes of this research. Whereas this project engaged with practitioners who are employed primarily in direct practice, follow-up research is needed to consolidate the application of ecosocial work at policy, research and management levels. Longer term research in other geographical locations, particularly larger metropolitan centres, is also needed.

The question remains, to what extent were the ecosocial work interventions developed by the practitioners transformative? Did the interventions reflect a congruent philosophical base where the actions undertaken were consistent with a worldview that emphasises holism and interdependence with the natural world? And, lastly, did any real or major change actually occur by addressing environmental injustice and/or by promoting environmental sustainability? While it might be said that the interventions were primarily human-centred, and therefore at best made only modest change, it could also be argued that these interventions could lead to substantial pro-environmental outcomes in the future, i.e., a cumulative or ripple effect where one event or action leading from a changed mind-set may lead to a series of similar or related events. Further to this, it is hoped that the development of 'self', as evidenced by practitioner interventions at the personal level, will lead to the development of ecosocial work interventions in the future. According to Norton (2012), the development of a connection between the 'self' and the natural world leads to human-inspired environmental protection. Although the research presented in this article endeavoured to enhance the profession's capacity for a coherent and ethical response to

environmental and social problems, it represents a starting point only, as the development of ecosocial work requires the ongoing collective efforts of researchers, practitioners, educators, service users and academics.

## Conclusion

The study presented in this article aimed to collaborate with Australian social work practitioners as co-inquirers to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions. Using a transformative ecosocial practice model, this project has demonstrated that social work practitioners from a diverse range of fields can develop and implement ecosocial work interventions at individual, group and organisational levels of practice. Outcomes identified a range of interventions, such as creating a calming place to improve emotional regulation for individuals, incorporating sustainable living practices into group programmes, and developing organisational in-service training about environmental issues. Factors that inhibited and facilitated the implementation of ecosocial work interventions were identified, as well as theories to inform practitioners. Outcomes suggest the need for longer term research to explore interventions at community and structural levels of practice, as well as across other geographical areas. At a time when the profession is increasingly dealing with environmental and social problems, it is timely to continue the momentum for change through ongoing collaboration with social work practitioners, as was done in this research project.

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