The relationship between social work and environmental sustainability: Implications for interdisciplinary practice

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Abstract:

The Brundtland Commission, formally the World Commission on Environment and Development, established by the United Nations in 1983, links peace, security, development and the environment claiming that war, poverty and structural violence result in the oppression and degradation of the human community as well as the physical environment. Likewise, human rights and social and environmental justice are intertwined, and social work, as a profession that collaborates across disciplines and within communities, is uniquely situated to provide leadership in the field of environmental studies. Its strong focus on human rights, social justice and community building creates a sound base from which to engage in the collaborative, creative, interactional processes required for environmental practice. This article seeks to discern a model for environmental social work within the context of interdisciplinary practice with peace and conflict workers and through the integration of inclusive models of economic development.

Keywords: social work | the environment | interdisciplinary |environmental practice

Article:

Introduction

Social workers are being called upon to play an increasing role in developing sustainable environmental practices (Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008). Currently, however, dominant social work practice models do not address issues of environmental sustainability. Nonetheless, social workers have the core skills necessary for environmental practice as they excel in networking, linking and engaging multiple sectors of marginalised communities, all of which are important to

sustainable development. Therefore, the profession is ideally situated to further environmental justice and promote sustainable development, which is a complex undertaking given the social structures that separate people from the physical environment.

Disconnected from the environment, human beings are willing to destabilise the climate, create conditions that support war and undermine their ability to meet their collective needs for water, food, land, safety and security (Fry, 2011; Orr, 2011). The severity of this separation is a recent development, and destruction has progressed rapidly since the entry of humans into the Machine Age. Thus, in industrialised countries, people have decoupled themselves from their physical environment, waging war against the ecosystems on which they depend to sustain complex life forms. Many believe, as a consequence, that humans have accelerated the process of climate change to a point where it is now the largest social issue of our time (Orr, 2011). This is evidenced in the near-constant degradation of the physical environment in order to maintain the coffers of the politically, culturally and economically privileged (Faux, 2006; Levy & Vaillancourt, 2011). In short, the destruction of the physical environment is an outcome of unrestrained or unregulated capitalism where natural resources are commodified as large, powerful corporations search for cheap labour and locations free from pollution regulation (Hoff & Polack, 1993). Greed has brought humans to the present economic – and environmental – crisis (Hart, 2010). Within contemporary capitalist economic systems, neither human nor environmental well-being is protected. Agriculture and forest harvesting occur without regard for society's long-term needs or environmental impacts. Although economic and business models have been central to creating this crisis, they also have the potential to develop more responsive and responsible practices (Hawken, 2010; Korten, 2005, 2010). Hart (2010) calls for a reinvention of capitalism by engaging a business ethic of caring and a commitment to preserve ecological integrity.

The road to an environmentally sustainable future requires an interdisciplinary response that engages both the social and physical sciences. Although the ecological environment is not divided into discreet packages, professional disciplines often attempt to understand it, not in its holistic complexity, but rather in bounded pieces. Consequently, contemporary educational and political systems have failed to respond to the environmental crisis (Orr, 2011). Remediation requires a holistic response relying on interdisciplinary knowledge and skills in developing collaborative practices at the local, regional and global levels:

Decisions makers exposed to interdisciplinary approaches to problem solving have a broader range of resources for response. Organizations that are not equipped to deal with interdisciplinary ideas fail to provide the systems needed to move environmental innovations forward. (Schmitz, Stinson & James, 2011, p. 87)

Within ill-defined, interdisciplinary spaces, social workers can operate as collaborators and team builders, bringing their practice expertise to the interdisciplinary response teams that are essential to address vital and complex sustainability issues.

Non-violent relationships are needed to counter the forces supporting war, poverty and structural violence that are humanly induced and result in the oppression and degradation of both the social and the ecological environments (Levy & Vaillancourt, 2011). Cultures exist that share large community spaces in which relationships affect the use, misuse and preservation of natural resources (Schmitz et al., 2010). In these 'collective' communities, members – with their combined economic, social and cultural capital – make formal decisions about ecological and social sustainability (see Coates, 2003). Some First Nations and Aboriginal communities (e.g., the Inuit and Lakota of North America) have models for respectful environmental or ecological use (Hoff & Polack, 1993; Jones, 2008). Rice (2011) outlines how indigenous peace-builders function from a holistic world view. The Indigenous Peoples Restoration Network (http://www.ser.org/iprn/int.asp) analyses traditional ecological models and provides resources on indigenous networks. These cultures would have much to teach them about whole-of-community responsibility for environmental sustainability in which humans act as caretakers of the environment. In non-violent terms, humanness is defined in relationship with other humans as well as the larger physical or ecological environment. It is the development of just relationships that leads to peace. For example, the Iroquois view peace and the law as one and the same, that is, as a unity (Wallace, 1994); while Judaic and Islamic faith traditions speak of *shalom* or *salaam* meaning 'right relationships' implying peace is inherent in relationships (Heathershaw, 2008; Rice, 2011).

Since planet Earth is a closed system, responses to global environmental threats must occur at all levels of analysis; yet, due to the lure of sustainability as a means of creating profit, the holistic exploration for ecological sustainability is lost (Epstein, 2010; Johnston, Everard, Santillo & Robèrt, 2007). According to Walker and Salt (2006), 'breaking things down in[to] small parts prevents us from seeing the whole picture' (p. 28) and ignores the complexity of reality. Sustainability, on the other hand, requires a more holistic, comprehensive approach in which elusive problems are more than scientific and technological and can be considered in their totality as complex systems (Kay, 2008).

This article introduces a holistic and inclusive model of environmental practice as a way to meet present and future environmental sustainability crises. The fields of peace and conflict studies and of economics are highlighted for the strengths they bring to a team that must simultaneously deal with issues of violence and economics in response to environmental crises. In particular, peace and conflict studies offer social work an expanded perspective and a set of skills needed to transform complex conflicts (Mendoza & Matyók, 2012). By engaging the *moral imagination*, peace workers develop the ability to *see* what is not yet present, the potential that exists for a positive future (Lederach, 2010). The inter-relationship between the political, cultural and economic arenas is recognised as indistinct, with ongoing change processes, creating new social contexts with blurred borders and constantly evolving ways of knowing. In the economic realm, a paradigm shift is needed to transform unsustainable, unrestrained and unregulated capitalism into ecologically and socially sustainable economic practices, locally and globally (Hart, 2010).

Redefining success from a focus on short-term to long-term outcomes creates a context for valuing both economic and environmental sustainability (Jones, 2008). A counter-narrative is presented to balance the dominant, privileged discourse where sustainability has become a code word for profit and exploitation (see above), and reductionist scientific thinking results in detached practice.

The environmental context for human life

Humans are a mere part of the larger ecosystem (Smith, 2011), yet they have a strong influence on the ecological environment that, in turn, impacts on the social, economic and political systems shaping everyday life (Egner & von Elverfeldt, 2009). The disregard for human and non-human life and unrestrained use of natural resources is tantamount to a war against the environment given the tight interconnections between violence, poverty and human and planetary well-being (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Figure 1 presents a model that centres the ecological environment as the base for all life, including human life. It portrays the complexity and embeddedness of humans in the ecological environment, placing human systems and the environment in an inextricable subject–subject relationship. This model builds from Capra's (1982) recognition of the dynamic interacting mindfulness of the ecological environment and is closely aligned to the ecosystems model in social work that views people in relationship with the environment. The complex issues of war, poverty and natural disasters are caught in the web of the interacting social, political and economic human systems. The context is provided for understanding the interconnectedness between the physical environment and critical aspects of the human experience (Meadows, 2008).
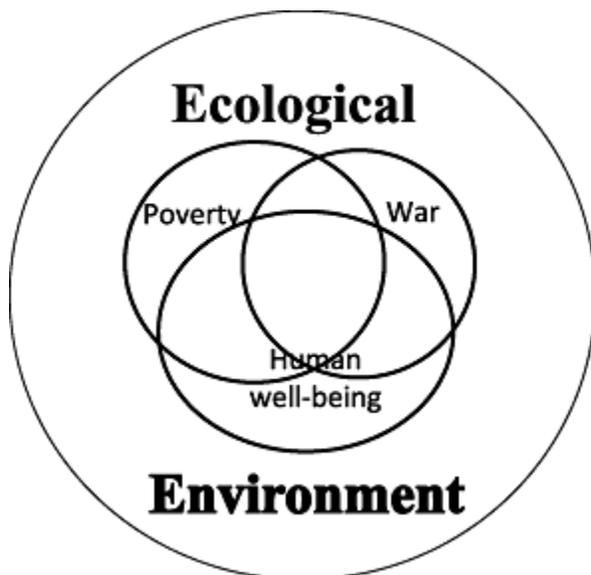
Figure 1. Human beings within the ecological environment.

When considering the ways in which human development interacts with and impacts upon the ecosystem that sustains it, tragedy unfolds, creating conditions harmful not only to humans, but

also to the environment (McCright & Clark, 2006). The ten poorest countries have all been ravaged by war, drought and poverty. They are plagued by battles over the control of resources, which might include water, diamonds, gold or oil. The presence of natural resources benefits the privileged while leaving most of the population in poverty. The interconnection of the issues can be witnessed in Somalia, which has experienced the violence of war, poverty and drought. As a result of this violence, the social, political and economic systems have disintegrated, and the ecological environment has been degraded, heightening the poverty. Famine is entrenched with the poverty of the population, impacting surrounding communities as well as the global community as people struggle to meet their most immediate needs.

Conversely, humans play an important role in preventing and remediating environmental degradation, ensuring sustainability (Stocker & Kennedy, 2009) and transforming political, cultural and economic practices needed for a sustainable future (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). In recognising the complexity of embedded human systems within the ecological environment, models for remediation are more likely to be effective in response to the complexities of environmental sustainability than existing scientific or technological models (see Waltner-Toews, Kay & Lister, 2008). When the social, political and economic objectives coincide, they create the greatest potential for positive sustainability (Rogers, Jalal & Boyd, 2008; Smith, 2011).

Environmental sustainability concerns long-term gains that places it at odds with unregulated capitalism and the valuing of short-term benefits. Humans find themselves in the midst of an ecological and social crisis with its roots in Western capitalist economic systems in which structural violence has become embedded in the political, cultural and socio-economic systems created and maintained by the privileged (see Korten, 1996, for related discussion). Hence, Hawken (2010) believes that if humans are to endure as a world culture, or group of cultures, they must incorporate ecological thinking into every aspect of their social mores, patterns of living and, in particular, their economic institutions.

David Korten (2005) underscores the role of humans as a choice-making species with the opportunity to shape the future towards the development of a life-affirming community. He calls for the development of living democracies as a transformative structure for achieving balance in the ecology and distribution of wealth (Korten, 2010). 'Living economies' are one way to protect the economy and the ecosystem (Shiva, 2005). Unlike the global agribusiness, which is destructive to both the environment and the local community, the living economy highlights food and family. Within this context, ecological balance and non-violent agriculture support the health of both the environment and the human community. Schumacher (1989) proposes 'Buddhist economics', an economics of peace, which supports the development of communities built on cooperation, the development of individual strengths and the creation of goods and services while engaging collectively with others to meet common goals. In this way, according to James and Schmitz (2011), '[w]ell-designed and structured sustainability practices can create positive benefits for organizations, the environment, and the economy' (p. 1).

Complex issues and interconnected response systems

The interconnection between poverty, food insecurity, inequality, environmental degradation, sustainability and development is well established (Soubbotina, 2004; World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). The United Nations recognises the link between environmental concerns, social stability and peace and security (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987). Primary focus has been paid to responses grounded in the physical sciences and technology. The social needs and concerns, including marginalisation, must also be addressed because the probability of exposure to environmental degradation and toxicity is influenced by the intersection between classism, racism (Bullard, 1993) and geographic location. Communities with high exposure to environmental risks also experience high rates of poverty and a correlated lack of resources. Communities in poverty are more vulnerable environmentally as well as socially; just as communities of colour in the USA and abroad face disproportionally high rates of environmental problems (Bullard, 1993). Gender inequalities and the feminisation of poverty expose women to higher risk with fewer resources for addressing oppressive environmental conditions (Demetriades & Esplen, 2010). Those disempowered by poverty have less control over the degradation of the environment and suffer disproportionally from the health consequences (Rogge & Darkwa, 1996). In the USA, tax laws and economic policies discourage environmentally sustainable practices, heightening the risk for communities marginalised by poverty (Hammer & Stinson, 1995; Hammond, DeCanio, Duxbury, Sanstad & Stinson, 1997). The global ecological crisis with 'roots in economic exploitation, racial oppression, and devaluation of human life' (Bullard, 1993, p. 19) presents issues not adequately dealt with by mainstream environmental organisations (Levy & Vaillancourt, 2011; Rice, 2011; Tuso, 2011). Effective response might be seen through 'drawing together the insights of *both* the civil rights and the environmental movements' (Bullard, 1993, p. 24, emphasis in original) to fight for environmental, social and economic justice. Conditions in Pakistan, where environmental scarcity has triggered social conflict heightening ethnic and class-based rivalries and political tension, exemplify the issues (Gizewski & Homer-Dixon, 1996). Without fundamental structural change, conflict is likely to increase and spread its reach into surrounding areas.

Those on the margins of society are little able to advance environmental justice as long as it is separated from the responses to the structural issues of war, violence and poverty. Environmental degradation, poverty and war are inextricably linked, and the human and social dimensions of this crisis are tied to issues of human rights and social justice (Mearns & Norton, 2010). Protracted environmental conflict often results from a struggle for resources to address social imbalances (Polkinghorn, 2000). Environmental conflict resolution responds by changing people's relationships rather than 'fixing' people per se (Santa Barbara, Dubee, & Galtung, 2009).

Integrated environmental practice

Social work is a field not only of direct practitioners but also of leaders, change agents, activists and community builders. Consequently, social workers are well positioned to advance environmental justice because of their expertise in collaboration, networking, advocacy, community development and capacity building. Sustainability concerns the preservation of biodiversity as part of human survival, social sustainability and social and environmental justice. When entering into the field of environmental sustainability, social workers have the training and skills to bring together and facilitate the work of interdisciplinary teams.

Because environmental sustainability is closely linked to conditions of poverty and violence, two fields that strengthen interdisciplinary environmental teams are economics and peace and conflict studies. From peace and conflict studies comes the understanding that any violence against the ecosystem simultaneously affects fellow humans and putting a stop to this violence, therefore, requires a counter-narrative to the dominant discourse that maintains the unjust social structures facilitating it. From the field of economics come models for economic development that can work against poverty. For example, groups like United for a Fair Economy (2011) support responsible wealth management and tax fairness in the USA, acknowledging the racial wealth divide (http://www.faireconomy.org).

Hoff and Polack (1993) believe social workers have a responsibility to ensure the just allocation of natural resources. Schmitz et al. (2010)see engaging in critical social work practice as joining with others in shifting economic systems towards more just outcomes focusing on the practice of justice and positive peace:

Particular works from the areas of social work activism, social justice, international business, social entrepreneurship, and the natural sciences have brought about insightful observations about the dynamics of environmental sustainability and its impact on individual decision-making, public policy formation, and economic development. (p. 84)

Yet to establish itself as a leader in developing environmentally friendly counter-narratives, the social work profession needs to expand its focus on the person and the social to encompass the ecological environment. At this level, social work and peace work are tightly intertwined. Beyond the humanistic focus of conventional human service organisations, environmental sustainability or ecosystems development incorporates environmental concerns as part of 'peace work'.

The additive value of peace work

Violent conflict is one of the most serious problems in the world today, and peace work is a broad-based activity that requires multidisciplinary expertise, given that peace is not something *out there* to be obtained but is waged simultaneously on multiple fronts. Since the end of World War II, 231 armed conflicts (according to the *Human Security Report*) have resulted in hundreds of thousands of deaths, millions of refugees and massive amounts of suffering. Violent conflict occurs at all levels of social interaction, the local as well as the global. Peace and

conflict studies scholars respond to the issues of the day, including genocide, the control of nuclear arms, civil wars, religious and ethnic violence, and terrorism. Government officials, the United Nations, humanitarian agencies, civil society and the military increasingly draw on the work of peace and conflict studies scholars and educators.

Peace work is about creating positive relationships and advancing social and environmental justice in order to meet individual and collective human needs in a way that protects the environment. Within peace and conflict studies, *peace* is defined as more than the absence of war. Rather, it is defined as the presence of the conditions necessary for human flourishing, including access to food and water, education for all, security from harm and other human rights and needs. This idea is rooted in understanding that a *peace* anchored by*justice* is the only sustainable peace. An approach that seeks only to stop the guns while ignoring human rights, human needs and unjust conditions is unlikely to work in the long run.

Conflict resolution originally formed as an area of study when scholars from multiple disciplines recognised the need to study conflict as a phenomenon. Quickly, the value of conflict analysis beyond Cold War issues became clear. Consequently, the field quickly moved into international and domestic practice. The field of study and practice is now applied at all levels of conflict from interpersonal to global (Miall, Ramsbotham & Woodhouse, 1999) and engages the practice of transforming conflict (Botes, 2003). The focus is inclusive of both the immediate and the long-term issues of transforming conflict to eliminate violence. A major interest of peace and conflict workers is the interconnection of human needs and structural, direct and cultural violence.

Peace workers play many roles in addressing environmental conflicts (Kriesberg, 1998). They practice as activists in transforming structural, direct and cultural conflicts. Some operate as *institutionalised mediator*, *ad hoc facilitator* and *ad hoc dealmaker*. They may act as mediators and facilitators of multilateral conferences engaging disparate parties to environmental conflict, or they may engage in transforming conflict surrounding issues of 'water usage, disposal of radioactive waste, or the location of a garbage burning facility' (Kriesberg,1998, p. 235). Peace workers are actively engaged in constructing dispute systems design processes to address environmental conflicts (Ury, Brett & Goldberg, 1988).

The blended knowledge and experience of peace studies and social work links environmental justice with peace development. Through collaboration and cross training, social workers can develop the knowledge and skills needed to engage in peace work directly and indirectly. As a result of their direct contact with marginalised individuals and communities, social workers occupy a unique space in peace work because of their skills in developing relationships and facilitating change, which provides the base for addressing economic oppression, seeking environmental justice and creating positive peace. For example, it was the women of Liberia, with a local social worker as one of the leaders, who were the instigators in peace development (see *Pray the Devil Back to Hell* at http://praythedevilbacktohell.com).

Anti-poverty work: social work and economic models

While social work practice is people-centred, holistic environmental justice necessitates a broader focus on non-violence at a structural level (Galtung, 1996). From a critical perspective, the causes of social and environmental problems are structurally induced, despite their personal manifestations (Blowers, 2003). Poverty and environmental injustice are both manifestations of structural violence. This necessitates the involvement of social workers in political and economic critique as well as social service delivery.

Growth-oriented exploitation has brought human civilisation to the point of ecological crisis. Responses to this social and environmental injustice require a counter-narrative for social workers who are engaged nationally and internationally in anti-poverty work. Ann McLaughlin, a social worker and the head of NGO Abroad (http://www.ngoabroad.com), discusses the vital activities of social workers acting internationally in response to poverty and basic needs. Too often, in response to immediate human needs, ecological concerns take a backseat to short-term economic need. The response is humanitarian in nature and does not engage basic structural issues. Anti-poverty responses that address long-term needs and goals are more holistic and must address issues of structural violence. Ecological issues are intertwined with anti-poverty programmes that address issues of structural inequality. The work of Wangari Maathai, 2004 Nobel Peace Prize winner, highlights the connection. In planting trees, the ecological environment and the community were both redeveloped (see *Taking Root: The Vision of Wangari Maathai*; http://takingrootfilm.com). McLaughlin calls for models of justice focused on economic development to replace current strictly humanitarian approaches. These models might include microfinance, enterprise development and social entrepreneurship.

Community social work

Social workers, as community workers, play a role in developing both a global and a local community consciousness of environmental or ecological issues. Coates (2003) challenges social workers to embrace new roles and engage in community practice: 'The importance of connectedness and relationship makes the re-establishment of a sense of community – of place and belonging – a primary concern for social work' (pp. 113–114). As change agents, social workers participate in social action at the individual and community levels; and 'direct the future research and policy agenda toward priorities that most directly resonate with the people who are most vulnerable to the consequences of climate change' (Mearns & Norton, 2010, p. 36). Through community work, they can lead to transformative sustainable change (Stocker & Kennedy, 2009) by engaging individual and collective decision-making processes. At the local level, those marginalised by poverty need information about ecological environmental risks and their interconnection to poverty. They also need tools with which to demand social, economic and environmental justice (Mearns & Norton, 2010).

The creation of change in complex situations requires flexibility and imagination (Lederach, 2010; Mayer, 2009) with messages and mechanisms of sustainability integrated at all levels of community (Edwards, 2005). This necessitates individual, community and organisational change in attitudes and beliefs about embracing an increasing focus on environmental sustainability. Social workers must, therefore, engage in difficult conversations about issues surrounding war, violence, and human-made and natural disasters, all of which create environmental chaos. Creating the conditions in which citizens can become change agents in transforming their communities or countries may require increasing awareness of the negative impact of environmental conditions and politics (Blowers, 2003).

It is possible to create change that incorporates ecological sustainability and also promotes economic growth with poverty reduction (Mearns & Norton, 2010). Orr (2011) has led the development of a collective, cooperative community-based response in a small mid-western community in the USA. It is a holistic educational and community redevelopment model. Models are being developed but too often stories of those at the creative edge where ecological, economic and social problems are successfully addressed in far ranging and global contexts are not shared (Edwards, 2005). Once the professional narrative is expanded to include ecological development and environmental justice, then it becomes easier to imagine how social workers can enter environmental practice by engaging existing skill sets within new contexts.

Many of the environmental issues involved are extremely complex and require an in-depth knowledge of the systemic effects of policy decisions. The combined efforts of peace workers and social workers, knowledgeable about issues of economics, bring a unique set of skills to efforts designed to mobilise citizen advocacy and address the inequities involved. While social workers and peace workers share roles such as facilitator, mediator, leader and activist, their knowledge bases are divergent, enriching practitioners when they work together. Integrated environmental practice involves a quest for social and environmental justice based on human rights, community organisation, capacity building and social networking, all of which are familiar to social work. Social workers and peace workers also share a multidimensional focus on policy in which the heart as well as the intellectual issues are engaged (Lederach, 2010).

The fields of peace building, economics and social work merge on environmental issues regarding resource allocations. Water rights are currently one issue hotly debated. At the global level, the fight for the use of water in Somalia is occurring at the intersection of the political, economic and social battles, as played out through decades of civil war and the structural violence of poverty and marginalisation. Coastal development issues are both local and global in nature. Mathbor (2008) has explored the effect of community participation on coastal development. Process, training of community leaders and community participation are all significant factors affecting the outcome. The economic factors, however, are also key. If there is no redistribution of wealth and power, the process suffers. At the local level, conflicts over coastal development are threatening future water supplies. Wealthy developers, often absent from the development sites, threaten the environmental health of local areas for corporate profit.

As developers and new homeowners pump more water out of the aquifers, the pressure is changed. As a result of pressure changes, salt-water intrusion threatens the available supply of fresh drinking water in some locations. Furthermore, the flow of salt water into the fresh-water marshes threatens the existing biodiversity. Within this context, social workers can serve as organisers, community workers and change agents. They might work in the community or neighbourhood; they also need to lead a process that engages policy change.

Social workers have the knowledge and skills for serving as a facilitator in the process of community transformation and for participating in the creation of the context within which individuals and communities can empower themselves to act. Because sustainability requires civic engagement, it cannot be a spectator activity. With increased empowerment, individuals can take collective, concerted action at local levels to create a sustainability pattern. Social workers play an important role in educating individuals for action within unique contexts.

As leaders with interdisciplinary knowledge and within an interdisciplinary context, social workers engage to build the relationships that undergird conflict transformation and facilitate the development of mechanisms that support an ongoing process of attitudinal change. Using an *elicitive* (Lederach, 1996) approach to conflict resolution and community development, social workers engage communities in learning and change. In developing a mindset and process for change, community members gain the skills and knowledge necessary to participate in the ongoing process of civic engagement, a process in which community members act as caretakers of the environment. As change agents, community members learn the global dimensions of the issues they face while they become actors within their own community development context at the local level, drawing on the ecosystems model of intervention. As communities move to eliminate social, political, economic and environmental violence, there are lessons to be learned from cultures that value and respect the rights and needs of all sectors of the current and future community. Changes in community norms include changes in the economic system. Shiva's (2005) living economies and Schumacher's (1989) Buddhist economics offer models that consider the health of both the environment and the human community across the long term.

Creating environmental awareness: developing stories of change

Humans use multiple competing stories or narratives to describe experiences and shape understanding of themselves individually and collectively (Winslade & Monk, 2000). In creating environmental awareness, it is helpful to validate peoples' stories and incorporate diverse perspectives. Reconstructing collective narratives about the nature of environmental problems and related community conflict creates new spaces for joining in the change process and listening to diverse narratives for addressing the social and ecological dimensions of sustainability (Mayer, 2009; Mearns & Norton, 2010). Peer pressure can be used to change attitudes, behaviours and even worldviews (Rosenberg, 2011). One shift might be the move from the short-term or immediate focus to a future orientation. Peer pressure has the potential to change individuals and communities. It offers the potential for both a social and a political cure.

'Change is linked to the potential of individuals to look deeper than surface facts to the cultural, political, and social issues that affect the environment and mediate their capacity to use this information' (Schmitz et al., 2010, p. 85). At the most basic of levels, humans strive to belong. This is a need that can be strengthened to inspire individuals locally and also to activate processes that transform societies. Rather than use education to create change, Rosenberg (2011) finds that the strong human need to belong is a much more effective tool for creating social change. Social, political and economic conflicts are grounded in the construction of individual and collective narratives. Making sense of existing narratives and reshaping complex cultural narratives to ones of change, respect and collaboration creates the platform (Winslade & Monk, 2000) for working holistically towards social, economic and environmental justice. Social workers can facilitate the development of environments that support a collective belonging with the creation of new narratives of long-term community benefit.

Kegan and Lahey (2001) challenge the language of personal assumptions that interrupt the possibility of change. In their model for transforming conflict in organisations, they address the need for members of an organisation to develop the language and internal capacity for change before they move to transform conflict. Midgley (2003) also addresses language and change. Myths represent the way a community interprets the world and the ways they can and do change. The myth of competitive individualism is responsible for economic, personal and environmental oppression. In order to promote a new ecological story, the myth of competitive individualism must be renounced. Shifting peer groups or the focus of peer pressure can support a change in identity (Rosenberg, 2011). The common denominator in these stories is that 'individuals have united to envision alternative models for solving many of the problems afflicting population centers' (Edwards, 2005, p. 130).

Conclusion

Rather than merely living in parallel to the ecological environment, humans live in symbiotic interaction with the ecological and physical environment. Individually and collectively, they depend on the living resources and physical conditions of the environment, which they synergistically impact. Because of our population density and technological advances, we now play a major role in impacting the environment, effecting negative environmental change at an increasingly rapid rate. We currently live with the consequences of the environmental degradation resulting from unrestrained capitalism, hyper-individualism and a disregard for the long-term effects of political, cultural and economic decisions. The most vulnerable communities are at highest risk. Climate destabilisation, resource shortages (water, food, land and safety), the pitting of the rich against the poor and intergenerational violence have created a base for war and nation-to-nation violence.

The complexity of the issues requires practice responses that are multifaceted and flexible. The lens of interdisciplinary cooperation offers a broad view of these complex global issues and the models and skills for response (Egner & von Elverfeldt, 2009). Economic development, conflict

transformation and peace building enrich the perspectives, knowledge and skills for complex environmental practice. In linking social and ecological justice, a context is created to support a role for social work practice in expanding environmental awareness, engaging in peace work and working with those participating in economic development. Bringing these fields together creates the potential to address the interlocking issues of war and violence, poverty and economic exploitation, and social and economic justice as they impact ecology and the environment.

The integration of interdisciplinary responses at the local, regional and global levels, which centre the ecological context, can be transformative. A complete narrative is one that values the scientific and the social, equally. When multiple organisations address environmental issues, they can, unwittingly, work at cross-purposes. Change necessitates collaborative leadership. As a profession with the knowledge and skills for engaging in multifaceted, complex practice, social work is ideally situated to provide leadership in working towards environmental and social justice through anti-oppressive environmental practice. Change models and narratives need to engage people inclusively from those who have been historically marginalised and heavily impacted to those on the fence and also those currently committed to unrestrained and selfish pursuits.

The inclusion of the ecological environment as the context for social work practice expands the profession holistically. As practitioners, social workers are beginning to enter the arena of environmental practice and, consequently, need to develop and articulate a holistic narrative inclusive of the ecological environment. Narratives calling for environmental sustainability build upon human-centred foundations, moving people, as change agents, to the centre of environmental narratives. The link between social justice, human rights and environmental justice as intertwined is increasingly recognised and embedded in the foundational values of the profession. Social work educational and practice organisations are integrating environmental justice into their core purpose, mission and focus. Social workers' practice expertise with organisations, communities and individuals brings forward the skills for responding to the issues. Change is not about superficial concerns, but rather about the interconnection between ecological environmental concerns, human rights and justice, the quality of human life, and issues of peace, war and natural disasters. It is about the basic quality of the ecological environment as the stage upon which the human drama is played.

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