The natural environment in social work education: A content analysis of Australian social work courses

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Abstract

The natural environment is increasingly incorporated into social work research, policy and frameworks for practice in recognition of the importance of ecological justice and the interconnectedness of humans with nature. However, it is unclear to what degree social work education has broadened its scope to include the natural world. Using a content analysis of 937 subject descriptions within Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) degrees, this article reports on the extent to which Australian social work education appears to cover content related to the natural environment. The findings from this study indicate there is an overall lack of engagement with this content. Reasons for this gap in social work education are discussed, as well as the implications for Australian social work education more broadly.

Keywords

Environmental Social Work, Green Social Work, Social Work Education, Content Analysis, Curriculum Development, Climate Change.

The global environmental crisis is one of the most serious threats to the welfare of humanity and to the natural world (Coates, 2005) and includes climate change, ecological degradation, over-consumption, industrial pollution, migration caused by natural disasters and conflicts accompanying competition for scarce and finite natural resources (Dominelli, 2012). Human populations suffer if the natural environment suffers (Dewane, 2011) and the most vulnerable individuals and communities, with whom social workers primarily work, are disproportionately impacted by the destruction and degradation of the natural environment (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Jarvis, 2013).

Traditionally, social work as a discipline has remained on the outskirts of discourses regarding the natural world and environmental crises (Coates, 2005). Although purporting the use of ecological approaches to practice and highlighting the importance of understanding the person-in-environment, “ecology” and “environment” have referred primarily to social and economic contexts and have largely neglected the natural environment (Dewane, 2011; Gray & Coates, 2015). The omission of the natural environment from social work practice has negated the holistic and interdependent relationship between humans and the natural world, fundamental to human survival and wellbeing (Gray & Coates, 2015).

Social workers are increasingly recognising the importance of integrating understandings of our relationship with the natural environment into social work frameworks and practice (Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001; Shaw, 2013). Since the 1990s there has been an exponential increase in academic literature, particularly literature of a conceptual nature, that considers the relationship between social work and the natural environment (Ramsay & Boddy, 2016; Miller & Hayward, 2014). Further, global peak bodies in social work have recently revised the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, & International Federation of Social Workers, 2012) to prioritise a commitment to practice

which “promotes community capacity building in responding to environmental challenges and human and natural disasters” and “facilitates sustainable social development outcomes, including the prevention, mitigation and response to disasters” (International Association of Schools of Social Work, International Council on Social Welfare, and International Federation of Social Workers, 2012, p. 4). In Australia, the profession’s Code of Ethics (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2010) mandates that workers “promote the protection of the natural environment as inherent to social wellbeing” (pp. 11) and that “social workers will advocate for and promote the protection of the natural environment in recognition of its fundamental importance to the future of human society” (pp. 20).

A number of authors have also argued that social work education must broaden its content to include the natural world, and include training for students to implement environmentally informed approaches to practice (see Gray & Coates, 2015; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015; Jones, 2008; Jones, 2012; McKinnon, 2013). As far back as 2003, Besthorn (2003) outlined a number of pedagogical exercises for educators to increase deep ecological awareness amongst social work students. Further, Jones (2012) in Australia has developed a framework to establish ecologically-informed social work curricula, while Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) provided a number of strategies to incorporate environmental content into social work education. However, despite increasing engagement with the natural environment at a scholarly level, the 2012 Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards Version 1.4 (ASWEAS 2012 V1.4) that regulate and guide Australian curriculum development for social work do not explicitly mention the natural environment in the nine core attributes underpinning social work education. The ASWEAS (2012 V1.4) are currently under review in “acknowledgment of changing and emerging issues for education providers and the profession” (AASW, 2015b, p. 1). Further, the integration of environmental content into social work education remains questionable. Jones

(2012) argued, based on a rudimentary review of Bachelor of Social Work courses, that there is limited engagement with environmental content. This is yet to be systematically and comprehensively examined.

Given the importance of ensuring that social work education is informed by up-to-date literature (Yaffe, 2013), it is imperative to understand the level of content on the natural environment within social work qualifying degrees. Consequently, this study assessed the explicit engagement of tertiary level social work education in Australia with the natural environment. It builds upon the small body of empirical literature exploring the engagement of social work education with the natural environment (Miller & Hayward, 2014; Jones, 2012), providing essential insight within an Australian context.

Study focus

The study aimed to understand the extent to which subject descriptions included content related to the natural environment. This was achieved by investigating the prevalence of terms related to the natural environment within social work subjects across Australia through a review of subject descriptions within Australian Bachelor of Social Work and Masters of Social Work (Qualifying) degrees.

Context

At the time of the study, between September 2015 and March 2016, 29 Australian universities offered a total of 44 qualifying social work degrees accredited by the Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) as listed on the AASW website. These included 23 undergraduate and 21 graduate level degrees. While there is no legal registration required for

Australian social workers, the AASW is the peak body for setting education and practice standards for the profession and many employers will require eligibility for AASW membership (AASW, 2015a). For this reason, universities offering degrees which are not accredited by the AASW were not considered in the study.

Within the 44 degrees, a total of 937 subjects (both core and elective) offered online subjects descriptions for public review which were analysed in this study. All core subjects were considered within the analysis, both within and outside the discipline of social work, as these subjects were mandatory learning for students. The analysis considered elective subjects offered within faculties/schools of social work, but did not consider elective subjects offered within other academic disciplines.

Method

Content analysis is a research methodology used to make valid and reliable inferences from text (Weber, 1990). The technique is useful to “reveal the focus of individual, group, institutional, or social attention” (Weber, 1990, p. 9) and has been used to analyse social work education both nationally and internationally (see Garvis, Lemon, Pendergast, & Yim, 2013; Hong & Hodge, 2009; Lacasse & Gomory, 2003). A priori coding categories were established through a review of literature regarding the natural environment and social work. As per Ramsay and Boddy’s (2016) review of environmental social work literature, authors have coined the following terms to describe social work practice incorporating the natural world; green social work (Dominelli, 2012), environmental social work (Gray, Coates & Hetherington., 2012), ecological or eco-social work (Jones, 2006, 2008), deep ecological social work (Besthorn, 2012), eco-feminist (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002) and eco-spiritual social work (Besthorn, 2002). Based upon this review, the following categories were

established to analyse the content of social work subject descriptions for the inclusion of environmental content: “natur”, “environment”, “green”, “eco”, “climate”, and “sustainab”.

The content analysis took place in two stages. The first stage was the coding of manifest content available online for social work subjects, measuring the presence or absence of search term categories. Subject titles were rated as either: 0= no presence of search terms, or 1= presence of one search term, 2= presence of two search terms, and so on. This level of analysis allowed for researchers to ascertain whether subjects exist which appear to focus explicitly on social work education related to the natural environment. Following this, subject descriptions were analysed for the presence or absence of search terms, and rated as per subject titles. Due to the discrete nature of the search terms, an interrater reliability statistic was not calculated (Holosko et al., 2015).

To increase the validity of findings, the second stage of the content analysis included a Key Word in Context (KWIC) enquiry (Krippendorff, 1980; Stemler, 2001). To account for words with multiple meanings, this analysis considered terms in context of the paragraph of use. The KWIC enquiry was used to manually rate terms as either: 0= unrelated to the natural environment, 1= related to the natural environment, or 2= uncertain. Due to the addition of subjectivity at this point and to ensure the reliability of the classification procedure for words with ambiguous meanings, the KWIC rating process was undertaken by two independent researchers.

The meaning of some terms remained ambiguous during the KWIC enquiry. These included; “ecological theory”, “ecological approach”, “ecological perspective”, “ecological framework” and “ecological practice”. Unless mentioned in the context of the natural environment, these terms were assumed to refer to dominant historical uses of the terms “ecosystems” and “ecological”; extensions of the “person-in-environment” approach which

refer not to the natural environment but to people within their social environment (Gray & Coates, 2015).

In cases where the meanings of terms remained questionable or opposing ratings were allocated by the two researchers, more detailed course profiles or unit outlines were sourced directly from universities. For example, the term “sustainable” or “sustainability” in the context of community work was questioned in terms of reference to environmental sustainability, as opposed to sustainable interventions. In all but three cases, the researchers were able to obtain the unit outlines which allowed for the clarification of term ratings. Terms which remained ambiguous at this point were rated as “uncertain”. Upon completion of the content analysis, data was analysed using basic spreadsheet software Microsoft Excel. Due to the descriptive nature of the study, frequency distributions and descriptive statistics were used to describe findings (Kramer, Pacourek & Hovland-Scafe, 2003).

Results

Publically available descriptions of social work subjects from 29 Australian universities were analysed for the presence of terms identified as related to the natural environment; “natur”, “environment”, “green”, “eco”, “climate”, and “sustainab”. Within the 937 social work subjects analysed, 0.43 percent ($n=4$) of subject *titles* included terms classified as related to the natural environment via the KWIC analysis. One university (Monash University) included two social work subjects with terms related to the natural environment in the subject title. Two subjects were offered as compulsory study (core subjects) for social work students, the other two subjects were available as electives at corresponding universities:

- “Developmental Approaches to Eco-Social Justice”; core social work subject at James Cook University, Queensland.

- “Social work: leading sustainable change”; core social work subject at Monash University, Victoria.
- “Gender, climate change and social sustainability”; elective social work subject at Monash University, Victoria.
- “Green Justice: Environment and Social Issues”; elective social work subject at University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland.

Search terms were present within the *descriptions* of 143 subjects ($n = 143$) (see Table 1). Of these, 31 subjects across fifteen universities were found to contain terms related to the natural environment as identified via the KWIC analysis. This is equivalent to 3.3 percent of all social work subjects assessed within this study ($N = 937$). Of these 31 subjects, the majority ($n=24$) were core courses with the social work degree. The meaning of three terms remained ambiguous after analysis, and were rated as “uncertain”. The following are examples of subject descriptions which contained search terms, but were rated as “unrelated to the natural environment”:

Various frameworks are utilised in order to understand the *nature* and impact of loss experiences in individuals' lives (Charles Darwin University, 2015).

The capacity to critically appraise various approaches (such as psychodynamic, behaviourism, problem solving, systems and *ecological*, humanism, postmodernism, critical, strengths and community approaches) and their application to practice are developed (Griffith University, 2015).

The subject matter will be considered in the context of current policy, and program and service delivery *environments* (Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, 2015).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

Within the subject descriptions which included terms rated as related to the natural environment ($n=31$), the majority (70.9 percent) of subjects included one search term (see Figure 1). Three subjects (9.7 percent) included more than two terms (see Table 1, Figure 1). A notable outlier was the subject “Green Justice: Environment and Social Issues” (University of the Sunshine Coast) that contained seven terms rated as related to the natural environment.

The following are examples of subject descriptions which included one term related to the natural environment:

It [the subject] grounds Australian and International Social work practice in the context of social, political, economic, historical and *environmental* considerations (Charles Sturt University, 2015).

It presents a holistic model of social change ... allows social workers to intervene across the broad spectrum of fields of practice in ways which enhance peoples well-being and contribute to their struggles for justice, human rights and *sustainable* development (Edith Cowan University, 2015).

This unit examines the relationship between human rights and thematic challenges including *climate* change, poverty, terrorism and oppressive forms of intolerance and discrimination (Queensland University of Technology, 2015).

It has a broad focus in that it covers social, economic, political, cultural, *environmental* and personal development (La Trobe University, 2015).

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE

The presence of terms rated as related to the natural environment were not distributed across all 29 universities; 15 universities (51.7 percent) were found to include social work subjects that referred to the natural environment within subject titles and/or descriptions. These included 23 undergraduate subjects (74.2 percent) and 8 postgraduate subjects (24.8 percent) (see Figure 2). The University of Sunshine Coast (USC) had the highest number of subjects which included terms related to the natural environment ($n=5$), followed by Charles Sturt University ($n=4$). Approximately half of the fifteen universities ($n=7$; 46.7 percent) offered only one subject within social work degrees which included term/s rated as related to the natural environment.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

In summary, a small number of social work subjects (3.3 percent) consider the natural environment. Of these subjects, a large proportion (70.9 percent) only mention the natural environment once. These subjects are not spread evenly across universities, with a little less than half of universities offering social work degrees (48.3 percent, $n=14$) containing no information in subject descriptions related to the natural environment.

Limitations

There are several study limitations. Firstly, online subject descriptions varied in length, with short descriptions having less opportunity to mention content related to the natural environment than longer descriptions. Secondly, detailed subject outlines were not analysed

for the majority of subjects meaning that the researchers could not conclude definitively whether the natural environment was considered with each subject. The authors acknowledge this limitation, but would argue that the presence or absence of terms related to the natural environment in the subject description provides a broad indication of institutional attention to the issue and the perceived importance of such content within social work education in Australia (Stemler, 2001). Thirdly, the study is limited by the subjective nature of the KWIC component of the content analysis. To increase the reliability of findings, any variation in the rating of search-terms between researchers was followed up by the analysis of a more detailed subject outline (sourced directly from universities). It is important to note that there were relatively few instances of rating mismatch between the researchers (14 subjects, 1.49 percent of total subjects analysed) which indicates a high level of reproducibility and therefore reliability of the classification procedure (Stemler, 2001).

Discussion

Results from the study highlight a gap in social work education in Australia. There are very few subjects (0.43 percent) dedicated to covering social work content related to the natural environment. Subjects which included some content on the natural environment predominantly mentioned it in a broad and cursory manner. The insufficient inclusion of topics related to the natural environment within social work education does not correspond to the substantial body of social work literature considering the natural environment. Results from this study align with the findings of Jones (2012) who argued that although social work literature is increasingly discussing issues related to ecology and the environment, education programs in Australia appear to neglect these issues to the detriment of students and the profession.

Within the analysis undertaken in this study, authors noted the presence of a number of subjects which lend themselves to the inclusion of environmental content in Australian universities. These include, but are not limited to, subjects which focused upon human rights, social justice, community development and practice, and global and international social work. Aligned with Jones' (2012) defined "pathways to ecological engagement" (p. 217) in social work education, these subjects provide opportunities for adding-on or embedding content related to the natural environment. Three universities have developed entire social work subjects dedicated to content related to practice and theory which incorporates the natural environment. This represents a shift from the findings of Jones (2012) who recorded the presence of a small number of environmentally-relevant subjects in Australian social work education, but described only two dedicated units provided within the faculty of social work (including one subject which does not exist today). Both "Gender, climate change and social sustainability" (Monash University, Victoria) and "Green Justice: Environment and Social Issues" (University of the Sunshine Coast, Queensland) appear to be subjects which have been initiated since the study by Jones (2012). This is an encouraging progression which provides a model for other Australian universities to follow suit.

The question remains; what are the barriers to educators in incorporating environmental content into Australian social work education when the need to do so has been repeatedly identified, the means to do so have been outlined within social work literature, and a number of schools have already developed such content? An explanation for this disjunct between the increasing body of literature and the lack of available educational content may be a curriculum time-lag (Desha Hargroves, & Smith, 2009), where the standard time it takes for institutions to update curricula may be unsuitable to equip graduating students with the knowledge and skills they require in a rapidly changing world. This is especially relevant in the context of increasing ecological change and environmental degradation (Desha et al.,

2009). According to Desha et al. (2009), educational institutions must engage in rapid “curriculum renewal” (p. 186) across all disciplines in a significantly accelerated time-frame to avoid the failure of ecosystems on our planet and ensure the viability of educational programs into the future. Such rapid reforms are required within schools of social work in Australia and are not impossible, as shown by the shifts in the USA described by Melekis and Woodhouse (2015).

The accreditation guidelines and standards which constrain curriculum development provide further insight into the lack of environmental content in social work education. The ASWEAS 2012 V1.4 regulate and guide curriculum development for social work. The ASWEAS 2012 V1.4 do not explicitly mention the natural environment in the nine core attributes which underpin Australian social work education. One of the 41 learning outcomes associated with the core attributes mentions gaining knowledge and the ability to critically analyse ecological systems “as important considerations of governance” (AASW, 2015a, p. 11). This gap may explain the overall lack of incorporation of environmental content into social work curricula across Australia, as universities are not mandated to include such content by educational guidelines.

Apart from these “practical” barriers to the inclusion of environmental content into social work education, it is important to recognise the impact of the dominant neoliberal ideology in which both Australian and global social work education is embedded. The neoliberal agenda has impacted broadly upon university education during the past decades. Universities have become environments of commercialisation and competition; both between and within universities (Bosselmann, 2001; Connell, 2013). The processes of managerialism and the associated drive towards economic performance and efficiency has resulted in top-down systems of university-decision making (Harris, 2014), whereby academics have largely lost their democratic power to influence decisions regarding the direction and content of

education: “commercialisation and the constriction of curriculum content to suit certain vocational, market-orientated ends has impacted on how and what students learn” (Hil, 2012, p.15; see also, Connell, 2013). This may be a significant force impeding the inclusion of the natural environment within social work education.

To ensure there is ample and in-depth material in social work education on topics related to the natural environment, social work educators must prioritise curriculum renewal that responds to rapid, global changes. Further, the standards, guidelines and policies that govern social work education need to be regularly reviewed and updated accordingly to reflect global priorities affecting the health and wellbeing of humans and the natural environment. Finally, social work educators would ideally challenge the dominant neoliberal ideology by taking time to develop courses, share material and collaborate across institutions, and advocate for the importance of content in social work education on the natural environment. These implications for social work education, and others, are discussed further in the following section.

Implications for Australian social work education

As highlighted by Yaffe (2013) “social work education, like any other social work practice, has an ethical duty towards evidence-based social work education” (p. 525). Social work educators have an obligation to ensure that teachings are informed by up-to-date research and are responsive to the contemporary environment in which students will find themselves practicing. For graduating social workers to be equipped to practice in a world where societies are increasingly impacted upon by climate change and environmental degradation, the disjunct between academic literature and educational content may be harmful to the beneficiaries of services (Yaffe, 2013), to the profession itself (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015)

and to the planet. Rapid curriculum reform of Australian social work courses to address these educational gaps is recommended as a result of this paper. The variety of literature available which describes and guides the incorporation of environmental content into social work education does not support the overall lack of educational content in Australian social work education, as revealed by this study.

Updating the ASWEAS 2012 V1.4 to explicitly include environmental issues within social work education is a logical first-step to ensure the development of environmentally sound knowledge and skills in social work students. The 2016 ASWEAS review (AASW, 2015b) provides a timely opportunity for the Australian social work profession to update the standards to address the gap in practitioner education outlined in this paper. Such a recommendation aligns with Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) who included in their strategies for curricula change, the need for professional and educational standards to be updated to ensure the inclusion of environmental content. Updated standards would complement and ensure the process of curriculum renewal, and align with the Australian social work Code of Ethics which explicitly mentions the natural environment (AASW, 2010). Such an update has been made in the United States, where knowledge and practices to advance environmental justice have recently been incorporated into one of the nine core competencies which underpin social work education across the nation (Council on Social Work Education, 2015).

As highlighted by Coates (2005), the environmental crisis we are facing is caused by humans and a direct result of this dominant worldview; it is “our way of life” (Coates, 2005, p. 31). For this reason, the movement towards social work education that promotes the inherent value of the natural environment represents a major ideological shift from the dominant neoliberal worldview and requires an associated radicalisation of the profession social work (Alston, 2015). While neoliberalism creates a significant barrier, many authors have highlighted that social work is well-placed to lead the way in terms of progressive and

radical change (Alston, 2015; Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2012). Gray and Coates (2015) described the need for a dramatic “perspective transformation” (p. 505) within the discipline of social work to enable curricula change toward holistic practice which incorporates the natural environment. This argument is supported by Jones (2012) who called for a “transformative approach” to social work education which inverts traditional social work education by valuing ecological knowledge as a basis to education for all practitioners.

The structural barriers for incorporating holistic, environmental content within university curricula related to an economic rationalist and managerialised approach to higher education have created “a climate of competition, extremely hostile to a collective, cross-disciplinary pursuit of sustainability” (Bosselmann, 2001 p. 169). The task of ensuring environmental sustainability and addressing the global ecological crisis is too large for any single discipline. The inclusion of environmental content within social work curricula will require an expansion of focus within the profession, across and into disciplines outside the traditional focus of social work education (Boddy & Ramsay, in press). A holistic and interdisciplinary approach to tertiary education is at odds with traditional Western reductionist styles of education, which promotes the division rather than integration of disciplines (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015; Coates, 2005). Fortunately, social work has a history of valuing and integrating knowledge from a variety of disciplines (from the humanities to the social sciences) (Miller & Hayward, 2014) providing a foundation for expansion to include inter-disciplinary knowledge related to the natural environment. Thus, social workers are well placed to develop curriculum on the natural environment as it relates to human health and wellbeing.

Conclusion

In summary, the results from this study indicate there is an overall lack of engagement in Australian social work education with content related to the natural environment. Within a profession that works alongside the most vulnerable and in an age of environmental and ecological crisis, this is of critical concern. While some Australian universities are shifting towards a more holistic and integrative education for future social workers, the vast majority do not consider the natural environment to any great extent within subject descriptions.

The authors have summarised a number of potential reasons for this lack of engagement, including a curriculum time-lag, the lack of inclusion of the natural environment within national educational guidelines, as well as the modernist socio-political context restraining both the profession of social work and higher education more broadly. Not one of these barriers are significant enough to undermine the importance of addressing the increasing environmental crisis immediately, before further irreversible climate change occurs. Addressing each of the barriers, as outlined in this paper, is a starting point towards shifting to a more holistic and transformative approach to Australian social work education.

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Table 2 Rating and frequency of search terms from Key Word in Context Enquiry (KWIC) within social work subject descriptions in Australia ($N=937$).

Rating*	Natur	Enivro	Sustain	Eco	Climate	Green	All Terms
0	60	31	1	12	5	0	109
1	0	12	8	0	2	0	22
2	1	4	1	0	0	0	6
>2	0	2	0	0	1	0	3
X	0	1	1	1	0	0	3
Total ($n=143$)	61	50	11	13	8	0	143

**Ratings: 0= unrelated to the natural environment, or 1= one term related to the natural environment, 2= two terms related to the natural environment, >2= more than two terms related to the natural environment, X= Uncertain meaning of term.*

Figure 1 Frequency of the presence of terms related to the natural environment within social work subjects in Australia ($N=937$).

Figure 2 Frequency of undergraduate and postgraduate subjects within Australian universities which included terms related to the natural environment. ^ indicates universities with subject titles which included terms related to the natural environment.