Ecosocial work and social change in community practice

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Abstract:

This special issue entitled, "Ecosocial Work and Social Change in Community Practice," focuses on an array of contexts, policies, practices, and challenges as well as successes related to an emerging vision for ecosocial work. Ecosocial work *is* social work, with all its depth and breadth, but it approaches the analysis of social problems, issues, and concerns with an ecosocial paradigm or lens, rather than an anthropocentric lens (Matthies & Närhi, 2016). Thus, ecosocial work is not a specialty within social work, rather all social work can, and we argue *should*, be ecosocial work.

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Article:

This special issue entitled, "Ecosocial Work and Social Change in Community Practice," focuses on an array of contexts, policies, practices, and challenges as well as successes related to an emerging vision for ecosocial work. Ecosocial work *is* social work, with all its depth and breadth, but it approaches the analysis of social problems, issues, and concerns with an ecosocial paradigm or lens, rather than an anthropocentric lens (Matthies & Närhi, 2016). Thus, ecosocial work is not a specialty within social work, rather all social work can, and we argue *should*, be ecosocial work.

The ecosocial lens recognizes the interconnectedness of all life in our ecosystem, and thus, the fair and sustainable use of resources to promote these relationships and the well-being of all. This lens requires us to critically examine and question modern societal structures, values, beliefs, practices, and ways of life that lead to social and ecological injustices through over-consumerism, materialism, anthropocentrism, oppression, and exploitation of people and planet (Boetto, 2017; Coates, 2003; Matthies, Närhi, & Ward, 2001).

From this perspective, ecosocial work is inclusive of structural social work in addressing the social structures causing social problems. It, therefore, pays particular attention to the socio-economic and political structures of a society/community; and, above all, it highlights how neo-liberalization increases inequality and vulnerability in certain communities (Matthies & Närhi, 2016). Ecosocial work encompasses green social work, interprofessional green care practices that bring people into contact with nature, and degrowth perspectives (Boetto, 2017; D'Alisa, Demaria, & Kallis, 2014; Dominelli, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Powers & Rinkel, 2018). We recognize that there is debate around some terms and concepts and the authors in this special issue may have various ways of presenting ecosocial work. As editors, we concur with a general consensus that *environmental justice* is more anthropocentric as it focuses on the impact on human populations and disparities created as a result of climate change, environmental degradation, and policies related to environmental management (e.g., fishing policies, disaster recovery). *Ecological justice*, on the other hand articulates a broader, ecosocial vision of justice – justice for the ecosystem as a whole with the understanding that humans are only one part of this ecosystem. If the ecosystem collapses, humans may not survive.

Ecosocial work is applicable at all levels of practice (e.g., micro, mezzo, macro) (see Rinkel & Powers, 2018); for purposes of this special issue, we focus on its application in community practice. The *Journal of Community Practice* is a fitting home for this special issue because it is the official journal of the Association for Community Organization and Social Action (ACOSA). This year, ACOSA changed the words represented by letters "SA" from "Social Administration" to "Social Action." This distinguishes us better by emphasizing that social work is not just about "administering" social programs, but about actually bringing people together to engage in social action to create social change that enhances the well-being of society. Thus, it is fitting that we have a special issue devoted to Ecosocial Work and Social Change, because this extends the vision of macro practice from society to the ecosystem, and offers a way forward for lasting and effective change. For example, ecosocial work includes interventions toward meeting the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, protecting people and the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all, including future generations (Smith, 2013; Smith & Rey, 2018).

The field of community practice encompasses activities as diverse as community organizing, prevention activities, policy advocacy, and organizing functional communities (Weil, Reisch, & Ohmer, 2012). Community – as a network of people based on geography, needs and concerns, and/or having a collective identity – is central to social work practice in many countries (Sjöberg, Rambaree, & Jojo, 2015). In particular, professional social work originates from community work practice, alongside individual casework practice (Payne & Campling, 2005). Community development can be conceptualized as an outcome, a process, and a practice that promotes collective actions based on the needs and concerns of a community. Development is not exclusively linked to any one economic model (e.g., post-industrial growth economic perspective, degrowth approach). Social workers who practice within the interdisciplinary realm of community development are educated and trained to pay particular attention to the needs and concerns of the most vulnerable and disenfranchised members of a community. However, if social workers conceptualize community from an anthropocentric lens, it may exclude relationships with companion species and other aspects of the natural environment. Social workers using the ecosocial lens (sometimes identifying themselves as ecosocial workers), on the other hand, focus not only on the social, cultural, economic, and political aspects, but also on the

relationships with the biophysical aspects of a community (Phillips & Pittman, 2009). Thus, the ecosocial lens is a holistic framework for promoting sustainable community development (Matthies et al., 2001).

We situate this special issue on ecosocial work in the context of community practice and social change, and we acknowledge it is part of a bigger, complex context, with historical and current conversations. This special issue aims to answer questions such as, how do we (re)center or (de)center from an anthropocentric lens to an ecosocial lens within social work? And, through the ecosocial lens, how can we separate our work toward sustainable community development from the typically accepted, post-industrial growth model, looking instead at degrowth perspectives as a path to a sustainable future? And, how do we mainstream ecosocial work in the profession? Within these queries, this special issue presents several themes. While these themes emerged, we also acknowledge that they are overlapping and interconnected with other themes, and not discrete. First, several articles focus on ecosocial work and ecosocial change around water, in particular, the ecology of coastal communities experiencing climate change and environmental degradation. The next section includes articles about ecosocial change and community practice in other kinds of bioregions. Finally, another set of articles primarily focus on pedagogical approaches for teaching ecosocial work. Below, we present brief summaries of the articles with editorial commentary as they relate to ecosocial work and our overarching questions for this special issue.

Ecosocial work, ecosocial change, water, and coastal communities

The ecosystem is the most natural and basic community for all living and non-living organisms, and it provides essential relationships and services for the well-being of all. Today, there is growing evidence that neoliberal capitalism, an outgrowth of colonialism, is among the root causes for climate change and other anthropogenic disturbances that are damaging ecosystem resources (Dellasala & Goldstein, 2018; Klein, 2014). Neoliberal capitalism is also at the source of conflicts related to the distribution and governance of ecosystem resources and services in various geographical communities (e.g., coastal communities). In particular, the pursuit of capital accumulation/profit has led to structural changes at national and international levels. This causes the overexploitation of local and global ecosystem resources by a small minority of individuals from the global community that are affecting livelihoods and causing socio-ecological vulnerabilities and injustices in local communities in various parts of the world.

Coastal communities are particularly vulnerable to climate change and anthropogenic disturbances (e.g., eutrophication, pollution, desertification, biodiversity depletion). Often, such communities consist of a diverse group of stakeholders that range from wealthy investors, hoteliers, and fishing businesses to the chronically poor artisanal fishers. The investors and businesses who earn their livelihoods through extractive activities and exploitation of coastal ecosystem resources and services create severe ecological injustices, such as the disproportionate burden of socio-ecological impacts experienced by traditional farmers and fishermen within a coastal community. Effective community organizing, and advocacy for ecosocial policies and governance of coastal ecosystems are vital for communities to thrive and become sustainable.

In this special issue, the first set of articles analyze and discuss socio-ecological problems, policies, and interventions related to coastal ecosystem resources. For instance, in "Overfishing, Social Problems and Ecosocial Sustainability in Senegalese Fishing Communities," Jönsson adopts a postcolonial perspective to examine the case on how the European Union's (EU) fishing agreement with the Senegalese government is causing the destruction of traditional sustainable living conditions and lifestyles of Senegalese fishing communities. In a similar manner, Rambaree, Sjöberg and Turunen present the case of a local fishing community in Sweden being affected by anthropogenic disturbances caused by industrialization and neoliberal policies and practices in their article entitled, "Ecosocial Change and Community Resilience: The Case of "Bönan" in Glocal Transition." In the article, "'Todo Ha Sido a Pulmón': Community Organizing after Disaster in Puerto Rico," Hayward, Morris, and Ramos present a case study on a coastal community organization and lessons for ecosocial work interventions after a natural disaster. The authors argue for ecosocial work practice within the interdisciplinary arena of professions and through community-led efforts for building community resilience and strategies to respond to environmental vulnerabilities. Additionally, other contributors to this special issue focus on analyzing political structures and policies affecting governance and exploitation of coastal ecosystem resources. Finally, in "An Intersectionality-Based Policy Analysis (IBPA) of High Seas Policy Making Stagnation and Equity in United Nations Negotiations," Sparks and Silva present a policy analysis to argue that the power structures within the United Nations are disproportionately affecting the exploitative marine activities and creating social and ecological injustices.

Ecological injustices from the legacy of colonialism

Climate change and environmental degradation is not limited to coastal communities but also impacts urban and rural communities in deserts, plains, mountains, and forests. In this special issue, the injustices from the legacy of colonialism are addressed extending themes from Lavoie (2012) regarding the conflicts between community organizing for social change and the constraints in operating in nation-building environments that emphasize social control. For example, Bell, Denis, and Krings offer "Collective Survival Strategies and Anti-Colonial Practice in Ecosocial Work." This piece rejects the premise that climate change is "new" and connects environmental damage to a broader history of colonialism. They provide hope that using indigenous knowledge in a decolonizing process can not only be a collective survival strategy, but also a climate resilience strategy. This theme is extended in "Indigenous Perspectives for Strengthening Social Responses to Global Environmental Changes: A Response to the Social Work Grand Challenge on Environmental Change" by Billiot, Beltrán, Brown, Mitchell, and Fernandez. For example, they note that indigenous knowledge can be used in an intervention for collective trauma by using storytelling and community mobilization. Likewise, in order to reflect ecosocial work values, climate resilience needs to respect sovereignty of indigenous people and their lands.

The colonial structures that limit autonomy of local communities also impact settler populations, involuntary migrants, and others. In "'Let's Talk About the Real Issue': Localized Perceptions of Environment and Implications for Ecosocial Work Practice," Kang, Fabbre, and Ekenga provide a case study of North St. Louis, Missouri, US. They find that some residents of this low-income, African-American neighborhood said that the real issue was violence and racism. While

respondents report being less concerned about global climate change, they did connect immediate environmental threats, like basement flooding, to a structure of racism, in that one resident felt bamboozled because she was not informed that her home was in a flood zone. The theme of backyard flooding in low-income neighborhoods is also addressed in Mason, Ellis, and Hathaway's article called, "Urban Flooding, Social Equity, and "Backyard" Green Infrastructure: An Area for Multidisciplinary Practice." In a survey of 234 residents, they find that few interviewees knew about ways to use green infrastructure to prevent flooding, but indicated that they were interested in learning more. The authors propose utilizing social networks to educate households about these climate change mitigation practices to close the trust and information gap. Urban communities are also considered in "Clean and Green Organizing in Urban Neighborhoods: Measuring Perceived and Objective Outcomes," an article by Mattocks, Meyer, Hopkins, and Cohen-Callow. The authors find that urban residents have a conflicted set of attitudes toward greening efforts in their neighborhoods because they believe that what constitutes a "clean" social order to promote a feeling of safety is one devoid of vegetation. The authors propose more popular education about the benefits of urban greening.

Contradictions, connections, and challenges between the global and local communities

Other articles in this special issue touch on contradictions between the global and the local communities in other ways. For example, Izlar writes about glocalism in, "Local-Global Linkages: Challenges in Organizing Functional Communities for Ecosocial Justice." While much of the community organizing literature focuses on geographic communities, a functional community is one that has a shared concern or identity, but may not live in proximity. In this article, he presents a case study on e-waste recycling to show how this distributed network of interests in a functional community can make ecosocial change. In contrast, other studies show how contradictions between capital and community are not overcome. For example, in Kvam and Willett's "'Mining is like a Search and Destroy Mission': The Case of Silver City," residents of a mining town feel powerless because state law impedes their ability to make change. In this case, they observe a mining corporation's attempt to provide community benefits, such as a restored water tower that none of the respondents in the study said the community wanted. In contrast, Powell, Bristow, and Precht present a case study of effective state level organizing to shut down fracking in "Amassing Rural Power in the Fight against Fracking: A Maryland Case Study." They use geographic data and coalition building to harness state power for ecosocial change. In the contribution from Teixera, Mathias and Krings entitled, "The Future of Environmental Social Work: Looking to Community Initiatives for Models of Prevention." In this article, they examine environmental justice campaigns and community initiatives in Warren County, North Carolina, US; Flint, Michigan, US; and Kerala, India to provide recommendations on how to mitigate harm from human caused environmental degradation and prepare for a sustainable future. Additionally, Dennis and Stock provide a retrospective of the lifetime of several activists who have combined social and environmental activism in "Green Grey Hairs: A Life Course Perspective on Environmental Engagement." They conclude that intergenerational relationships are not new and offer hope to connect to a new generation of ecosocial change makers.

Ecosocial work pedagogy

While there is not one pedagogical approach for ecosocial work, several models are presented in these articles. The ecosocial lens elicits pedagogical approaches that are multifaceted, interdisciplinary, and expand ways that we may co-create a decolonizing pedagogy that is intrinsically linked to local and/or indigenous knowledge and ecological justice. A critical ecosocial work perspective questions modern societal structures (e.g., economic models), values, beliefs, and ways of life, and pays particular attention to the socio-economic, political structures, and geospatial issues of both community and society. Thus, any pedagogical approach must promote becoming aware of one's worldview or lens, and promote the ecosocial lens and critically examine the anthropocentric lens (Rinkel & Mataira, 2018).

Several global factors have moved the ecosocial lens forward within our profession, including, the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (International Federation of Social Workers, International Association of Schools of Social Work, & International Council on Social Welfare, 2012), eliciting pedagogical conversations and resources (see Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2012; Dominelli, 2018; Krings, Victor, Mathias, & Perron, 2018; Mason & Rigg, 2019; Powers & Rinkel, 2018). Within the European context, for example, Matthies, Stamm, Hirvilammi, and Närhi (2019) present 50 interesting examples of ecosocial initiatives at community level in Finland, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and the UK. The authors provide concrete examples on how social workers operating at community level can engage in sustainability transition of societies through ecosocial work. Additionally, in national arenas, the ecosocial lens is also becoming more discussed and embraced. For example, the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare included in its Twelve Grand Challenges for Social Work (Kemp, Mason, & Palinka, 2015) the question "How can social work create social responses to a changing environment?" Also, in 2015 in the US, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) added *environmental justice* to its third competency: "Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" and as a component in the fifth competency of "Policy Engagement." While some of the contributors to this special issue worked with CSWE to make this change, we also acknowledge that embedding it is just one way to move this conversation forward, and we must move beyond embedding to promote the full embrace of an ecosocial lens across the global profession at large. We also acknowledge that some social work professionals and organizations have always or have already shifted to embrace the ecosocial lens, and we look to them for guidance.

Several articles in this special issue focus on promoting ecosocial work through our pedagogical approaches. These articles include various settings, audiences, and strategies in formal classrooms, field internships, study abroad courses, conferences, and in popular education. First, Powers, Schmitz, and Beckwith Moritz, in their article "Preparing Social Workers for Ecosocial Practice and Community Change," note the pedagogical approaches of the infusion model and the integration model (Boetto, 2017). Each of these models is elaborated through examples from the authors' own experiences. Both models are seen as necessary in advancing the ecosocial lens within the profession, and social work educators, as well as students, are leaders in this work. Next, Schusler, Krings, and Hernández offer an article about popular education with indigenous youth and youth of color entitled "Integrating Youth Participation and Ecosocial Work: New Possibilities to Advance Environmental and Social Justice." When provided the opportunity, youth articulate a vision of a just future that is unique to their shared identities, connected to place and land, and respects self-determination. They made a commitment to future collaboration

and movement building based on authentic communication, loving acceptance, and solidarity. For these youth, social justice is inseparable from environmental issues.

In an article entitled, "Social Work Students' Perspective on Environmental Justice: Gaps and Challenges for Preparing Students," Decker-Sparks, Combs, and Yu report on how prepared 14 social work students feel they are for doing environmental justice work. While the students in the study report that environmental justice is a relevant issue, they report having difficulty connecting it to social work clients and report feeling overwhelmed by the magnitude of the situation. Part of this, they say, comes from their own detachment, but also having trouble understanding the feedback loops in the ecosystem. The authors recommend engaging other disciplines but also to have activities in social work classrooms that develop concrete ways of connecting the environment to social work.

The debate around terms and concepts such as environmental justice and ecological justice is articulated in the contribution by Hudson entitled, "Nature and Social Work Pedagogy: How U.S. Social Work Educators are Integrating Issues of The Natural Environment Into Their Teaching." Hudson interviewed 16 social work educators about their relationship to the natural environment. He finds that his respondents mostly agreed that theory courses were the best place to teach about the natural environment, but there were few materials to use. Respondents were particularly interested in sustainability and food systems. Hudson is careful to distinguish environmental justice (i.e., human-centered) from ecological justice and finds that some of the social workers he interviewed were beginning to focus on issues of ecological justice.

Conclusion

We acknowledge the global, historical and current conversation in which we situate this special issue. We are pleased to offer it as one of the many emerging scholarly resources that are increasingly available as we address the global ecological crisis as a profession. The aims of this special issue were to explore how to de-center from an anthropocentric lens to an ecosocial lens within social work, decouple sustainable development from the post-industrial growth model and embrace a degrowth approach, and mainstream ecosocial work in the profession, and specifically within our pedagogical approaches. With these overarching aims for this special issue, we were pleased to have such a broad range of topics covered within the articles. Indeed, some articles were so unique in their cutting edge content, that we had to overcome struggles to get the best reviewers.

Several articles connect ecosocial work to the detrimental legacy of colonization; however, we hope that future ecosocial work scholarship explicitly critiques growth as an ideology and articulates a vision of prosperity without growth. Additionally, this special issue provides a few models and examples that schools of social work may use to promote an ecosocial lens and teach about the environment so that social workers can better respond to the changing environment. Articles in this special issue also point us toward degrowth as a strategy for restorative practices to better realize ecological justice.

Despite the breadth of the articles in this special issue, we note that there are several limitations that we hope future research and scholarship on ecosocial work will address. First, the most

prominent limitation of this special issue is that almost all of our articles are primarily by authors from and about places in the US. And, although we do have content from Bönan, Sweden; Coastal Senegal; a University Program in Belize, and Kerala, India, we had hoped to receive more submissions that better represent the global ecosocial community practice that exists. We also note that future ecosocial work scholarship should address the controversial values and interventions around mere limits to population growth without considering the limits of economic growth. Finally, more ecosocial work scholarship that critically appraises ineffective environmental practices (e.g., greenwashing) are also warranted. While the articles in this special issue covered, to varying degrees, some aspects of the aims of this special issue, future scholarship could further explore these topics in greater depth.

We hope that this special issue intrigues, enlightens, inspires, and elicits conversations as we move forward in our collective efforts to address the ecological crisis through ecosocial work and community practice.

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