Article

International Social Work
2018, Vol. 61(4) 490–502

DOI: 10.1177/0020872816644663
journals.sagepub.com/home/isw

The ecosocial approach in social work as a framework for structural social work

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Abstract
The article aims to deepen the understanding of structural social work from the point of view of the ecosocial framework. It analyses selected current international literature from the debate on the new wave of various interpretations of ecological social work. The debate shares four main themes: (a) a global perspective, (b) a critical view of professional social work, (c) a holistic ecosocial transition of society and (d) environmental and ecological justice. The ecosocial framework challenges structural social work to follow the principles of sustainable development and considers environmental issues as a crucial part of the goals and practical activities of structural social work.

Keywords
Ecological social work, ecosocial approach, global social work, structural social work, sustainable development

Introduction

A need for social work approaches that go beyond individual and family-level problems and solutions has become apparent, especially in times of societal crises. Structural social work is considered to be one of the approaches and has been discussed quite intensively since the late 1970s in different countries and contexts (e.g. Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 1997, 2007; Payne, 2005). One of the main ideas in structural social work is that an individual recovery or change is often seen to be related to change in social and societal structures (e.g. Lundy, 2004). Our aim in this article is to deepen the understanding of structural social work by identifying its links to another recently

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intensified debate within the field, the ecosocial approach in social work (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b; McKinnon & Alston, 2016; Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Mary, 2008; Matthies and Närhi, 2014; Molyneux, 2010; Peeters, 2012b). In doing this, we wish to contribute to the conceptual clarity of social work's theoretical tools by not only mapping the current debates that reach beyond an individual focus, but also by identifying the interconnections between different conceptual and theoretical traditions. While aiming to deepen the conceptual understanding of structural social work and the ecosocial approach in social work, their practical applications and both professional and methodological tools remain less addressed in this article. In addition, our conceptual analysis is geographically limited to Western social work and covers mainly the debates in the English and German languages.

Structural social work refers to interventions addressing the structural origins of social problems (Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 1997). It refers to the critical and radical social work traditions that pay attention to the large socio-economic and political dimensions of society, and above all to how capitalism increases inequality among individuals and communities. It focuses on the interaction between individual actors and structures, and in particular on the structural barriers that worsen and restrict the living conditions of social work service users. It also concentrates on acting collectively and critically reflecting on practices and organisational structures with citizens (e.g. Baldwin, 2011; Lavalette, 2011; Moreau, 1979; Mullaly, 1997, 2007; Payne, 2005; Weinberg, 2008). At the practical level, structural social work means for instance knowledge production about the living conditions of people and their links to societal structures and political decision-making that either advance or prohibit human wellbeing, especially in regard to vulnerable groups of people. Furthermore, structural social work means influencing local policies based on the knowledge production of various actors and also bringing the expertise of social work into the planning and collaboration concerning other fields and sectors of local issues (Seppänen et al., 2014).

The ecosocial approach in social work refers to different social work traditions and discourses that combine social and ecological perspectives (cf. Närhi and Matthies, 2016). Over the past few years, the concepts of ecosocial, ecological, green and environmental social work have been used interchangeably in various global social work contexts (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003; Dominelli, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b; Närhi and Matthies, 2001, 2014; Mary, 2008; Molyneux, 2010; Norton, 2012; Peeters, 2012b). For reflecting these approaches in global and local contexts of social work, the comprehensive perspective of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations (UN) has the highest-level endorsement (UN, 2015). Instead of focusing on the development of the less developed countries promoted by the world community, as done in the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs' perspective is essentially enlarged to the question of how to achieve a sustainable and inclusive world (SDG Fund [SDGF], 2016). Indeed, the 17 new SDGs, agreed upon and to be accomplished by each of the UN member states, embed a strong relevance for structural and sustainable social work. This is not only because social wellbeing and equality factors are included, but because they are now very directly seen to be connected with economic and ecological dimensions of sustainability (SDGF, 2016). Therefore, this document as such is a vital recognition, but also a demand for social work to get involved also in more comprehensive efforts of sustainability.

In this article, we use the ecosocial framework as an umbrella concept to emphasise the interrelated links between ecological issues and social work (Närhi, 2004). The analysis of the interface between social work and the environment was visible at the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development in Stockholm in 2012 and in Melbourne in 2014, and both events strengthened the new global network for environmental social work. Related to these debates in 2012, three significant volumes were published: (a) a Special Issue of the *Journal of International Welfare* edited by Coates and Gray (2012), (b) *Environmental Social Work* edited by

Gray et al. (2012b) and (c) *Green Social Work* authored by Dominelli (2012). We have selected these three publications to be analysed since they demonstrate the new and global wave of the ecosocial debate; they were published in the same period and comprehensively cover the ecosocial publications and debate of the era. Applying thematic textual analysis (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006; Vaismoradi et al., 2013), we first analysed the main themes of each publication. We were especially interested in recognising the novelty of their agendas compared with the earlier ecosocial debates of social work that we have analysed in previous publications (Matthies, 1987, 1993; Matthies and Närhi, 1998; Matthies, Närhi and Ward, 2001; Närhi, 2004). After the re-reading and coding process of each volume, we analysed their main found and shared themes from the perspective of structural social work and added other relevant literature in order to deepen the discussion of the highlighted themes.

The ecosocial approach in social work

From the point of view of the ecosocial framework, structural social work broadly concerns the structures of society and economy and, above all, how nature and the physical living environment relate to social wellbeing and social problems. The two major theoretical traditions within the ecosocial framework outlined by us – the systems theoretical and ecocritical approaches (Matthies, 1993; Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Närhi, 2004) – continue to appear as central categories in the international literature (Gray and Coates, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012c; Mary, 2008; Molyneux, 2010; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b).

As has been stated by several authors (e.g. Germain and Gitterman, 1980; Kemp, 2011; Meyer, 1983, 1995; Wendt, 1994; Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Närhi, 2004), the systems theoretical perspective (the ecosystems approach) highlights the significance of the social environment as a key framework for human growth and wellbeing, as well as emphasising the holistic and systemic thinking in the interventions of social work. A holistic approach is considered to help social workers to better understand the problems, resources and interconnections in the relationship between service users' living environment and wellbeing. Systems theory was influential in social work particularly in the 1970s. In addition to providing a conceptual framework, it was then understood as a symbol of the unification of social work, which was supposed to strengthen the profession's authority (Payne, 1994). The aim was to differentiate social sciences, including social work from other disciplines, by developing the systems theoretical perspective, which emphasised social relationships and the social environment but left the biophysical environment (nature) outside of the theory (Coates, 2003; Payne, 2005).

The systems theoretical perspective has been criticised in ecosocial debates because it has been seen to ignore the broad living environment and nature as parts of its theory and activity. According to the critique, the systems theoretical perspective cannot take a stand on global environmental issues. Therefore, the role of social work is argued to be restricted to helping people to adapt to their present environment and the changes therein. The neutrality of the systems theoretical perspective is considered to be its weakness – for example, the relationships between environmental issues and social work are not regarded as political questions (Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Närhi, 2004; Besthorn, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray and Coates, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012b; Molyneux, 2010; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b; Zapf, 2010).

The roots of the other main dimension of the ecosocial approach, the ecocritical perspective in social work, can be identified in the ecological crisis of modern society and the ecological movement that has been gaining strength globally since the 1970s and 1980s (e.g. Blanke and Sachsse, 1987; Hoff and McNutt, 1994; Kuchhermann, 1994; Opielka, 1985; Opielka and Ostner, 1987). The approach questions the model and lifestyle of the entirety of Western society that pursues continuous

economic growth and is based on the exploitation of natural and human resources in order to gain financial profit. Hand in hand with ecological awareness, the traditional 'social issue' (*Soziale Frage*) of social policy has been translated into an 'ecosocial issue' (Opielka, 1985; Matthies, 1990). In social policy and social work, social and environmental issues are now seen as parts of the challenge faced by the entire industrial 'modern project' (Beck, 1986). A degrowth-oriented, ecologically sustainable and socially equitable society needs structural changes in addition to individual changes. Social work needs to reflect on its own actions and the development of society based on the criteria of sustainable development. In addition, social work is criticised for its role in the technological–economic and bureaucratic–professional system (e.g. Matthies and Närhi, 2014; Matthies, 1993; Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012c).

Main themes of the current ecosocial debate in social work

Based on our thematic text analysis of the chosen three publications, we have found four shared core themes that crystallise the main agenda of the current ecosocial debate. The themes are as follows: (a) a global perspective of the ecosocial approach, (b) a critical reflection of the Western type of professionalism in social work, (c) a connection to the cross-sectoral ecosocial transition of societies and (d) environmental and ecological justice. In the following, we discuss each of these topics from the perspective of structural social work.

The global perspective of structural social work

The ecosocial discussion of social work has only very recently grown together in a unified way at the global level, compared with the previous more national and language region-based discussions. When the economy becomes global, it simultaneously connects local environmental and social issues with global economic structures (e.g. Elsen, 2011c; Gray and Coates, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b). The growing visibility of the developing countries in defining sustainable and citizen-oriented social work also demonstrates the globalisation of social work and its ecosocial approach (Dominelli, 2012: 174). Global social work organisations have published the Global Agenda of Social Work, which includes an ethical commitment to human rights and social justice at the global level (International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) et al., 2012; Jones and Truell, 2012) – a worldwide mission that is an unavoidable consequence of economic globalisation. In this discourse, emphasis is placed on social and economic equality, the integrity of human dignity, ecological sustainability and collective togetherness. The idea is that if social work aims to fight poverty, it must also be able to attack global economic structures and provide the necessary prerequisites for an economically sustainable living to those who are lacking them. These fundamentals are often connected to the utilisation and equitable sharing of natural resources (Jones and Truell, 2012). Actually, Global Agenda for Social Work is where the linkages between poverty, economy and ecological issues were identified even before they were taken into the policy development of the UN. UN member states agreed to start the process of defining the SDGs during the Rio Summit in 2013 and connected the economic development to environmental policies and global economies (UN, 2013, 2015).

In her book *Green Social Work*, Lena Dominelli (2012) deals with such themes as urbanisation, industrial pollution, climate change, energy issues, wars and migration caused by environmental crises, natural catastrophes and the growing shortage of natural resources. She analyses their connection to social work and to structural reasons arising from the core of the capitalist market economy. Dominelli moves the ecosocial viewpoint of social work once and for all to the global level, where indigenous peoples and the poor Southern hemisphere are particularly central (cf. also Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Marlow and Van Rooyen, 2001).

The question about the global responsibility of social work is on the rise as cross-national investments, global capital transfers and profit-seeking are now much more visible in social work practice. They may have an effect on the creation or closing down of jobs, on environmental degradation, on unequal wealth distribution – and on financial breakdowns (cf. Dominelli, 2012). Multinational companies are operating at the local level of social and health care, but their financial returns and decision-making structures are out of reach of citizens' democratic organs. According to Burkhard Flieger (2011: 315), this directly reduces local and regional economic value-added production and, in the long run, destroys the possibilities and tools to develop local living conditions. Not only is the creation of local welfare services hindered, but outsourcing also results in the withering of local democracy and financial power. In the international ecosocial literature, the deepening economic globalisation is categorically disapproved, and different models of local self-sufficiency are developed instead (e.g. Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Elsen, 2011b; Peeters, 2012b).

Correspondingly, the worldwide economic system is globally linked to various projects that have an impact on social work in some other country, particularly in the developing countries. At the Joint World Conference on Social Work and Social Development, an Indonesian social worker described her work in defending the rainforest protection zones of indigenous villages in her country against the projects of the multinational forest industry based in Finland. In these projects, rainforests are cut down to be utilised as raw material in paper mills. At the same time, Finnish social workers have to meet the needs of unemployed former employees of closed-down paper mills in Finland, as production has been moved to Indonesia.

As a conclusion to the globalised ecosocial discussion, structural social work now has new issues to reflect upon: the role of social work and its responsibility in the global structure of the economy that causes different social and ecological problems at the same time in different parts of the world. It is of primary importance for social work to be aware of how each locality's social, economic and ecological problems and opportunities are connected to the global and local development of the economy, social justice and the environment. Due to challenging inequalities at the global level between nations, it is not easy to define the groups of people who have or do not have a right to improve their circumstances economically and socially. But as the recent environmental catastrophes and international studies have shown, the socially and ecologically most vulnerable areas suffer the most from environmental damage (e.g. Hetherington and Boddy, 2012; Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2014; UN, 2015). From the perspective of the ecosocial framework, defending the most vulnerable citizens and communities and acting in cooperation with them against economic structures and environmental damage are therefore both global and local challenges for structural social work.

Critical reflection of the Western type of professionalism of social work

The recent ecosocial discussion has noted that the global ecological crisis is also a crisis of the Western type of social work professionalism: it has not been able to defend the most vulnerable people and promote social justice. This has also prevented social work from addressing global and local environmental issues, which often cause poverty and social injustice (Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012: 19; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012c). As the ecosocial approach was discussed at an international doctoral school of social work, European students wondered why they had never before in their studies heard of the connections between social work and environmental issues. In contrast, a Nigerian and an Indian student saw nothing new in the ecosocial approach, as in their home countries social workers are directly involved with environmental issues on a daily basis: in Nigeria supporting local communities to protest against the harm caused by multinational companies polluting oil fields; in India organising the planting of trees in order to prevent landslides and floods (Ranta-Tyrkkö,

2010). There is plenty of evidence that ecosocial issues are relatively broadly neglected in the curricula, practice and professional discourse of at least Western social work (Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b; Jones, 2011; Kemp, 2011; Zapf, 2010). In Western industrial countries, publicly organised professional social work has been pressed into an ever tighter corset of a managerialistically coordinated service system. In this service system, the job description is chiefly restricted to line work with individual clients or to being part of multi-professional apparatuses, and is a strictly timed and documented piece of the service chain (Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a). There is hardly any room to address the origins of the problems in a structurally effective way or to negotiate with different communities on new ways to resolve problems (cf. e.g. Dominelli, 2012). This is driving social work into a deep conflict in regards to its own societal function and identity (Coates, 2003; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012b). The crisis concerns particularly (self-)confidence, as social work does not proactively define its own boundaries or develop new directions but has remained a reactive institution (Dominelli, 2012). The confrontation of two different self-understandings in social work has been analysed by several authors (e.g. Dominelli, 2012; Elsen, 2011d; Staub-Bernasconi, 1989). According to these interpretations, social work has, since its early days, included two lines of approaches. One of these lines has a structural and political emphasis with a broad understanding of the person-in-environment. The other line focuses on individual social help and is restricted to considering only the social environment (Dominelli, 2012; Elsen, 2011b; Gray et al., 2012c; Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Matthies and Närhi, 2014; Staub-Bernasconi, 1989).

Dominelli (2012: 21–4) draws a historical line all the way from the pioneer times to the present day of social work; she identifies a corresponding difference between systems-oriented social work in Western post-industrial countries and community-oriented social work in developing countries. The neoliberal management model of the public sector has been cutting the ground from under the feet of service user-oriented social work which has resulted in a weakened professional autonomy, an increase in employee control and more bureaucracy (e.g. Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012: 19–20). In several developing countries, but also in some non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Western developed countries, on the other hand, the participation of social workers in social and community development projects provides social work with a different authority and standing among citizens and in the public eye (see Dominelli, 2012; Marlow and Van Rooyen, 2001; Shepard, 2012; UN, 1992). Ecosocial literature gives various examples of structurally effective social work with local communities, as well as in social movements and the third sector (Dominelli, 2012; Elsen, 2011c; Gray et al., 2012b; Shepard, 2012).

In conclusion, structural social work in Western industrialised countries could benefit a lot from the way ecosocial aspects are seen as an integral part of social work models in developing countries. On the other hand, the importance of the legal and financial resources provided to Western social workers through their role as public authorities cannot be neglected. Many developing countries actually aim to establish public welfare policies and social work similar to the Western model. Furthermore, in order to promote structural social work, social work should be brought back to the communities to act together with local citizens based on their needs. At the general level, the Global Agenda process has opened up that debate (UN, 1992). The ecosocial framework also demands that social work needs definite tools for interfering structurally and proactively in social and physical living conditions. In addition, social work should critically analyse its own professional working conditions and investigate how far they are in conflict with the overall criteria of sustainable development. Finally, in order to promote structural social work the connection between the environmental crisis and the crisis of social work professionalism must be addressed more extensively as a part of professional self-understanding. A broader understanding of person-in-environment is needed in order to understand how human and nature are interconnected and what that means in social work practice. A global and local ecosocial framework is needed in social work education, both as a theoretical perspective and as a practical action model.

Social work as part of the ecosocial transition of society

The third new feature in the ecosocial discussion is the increasingly highlighted cross-disciplinary role of social work through the requirement of ecosocial transition in society. Societies have been radically challenged to implement an ecological and social transition, which unites different disciplines and societal actors to look for a holistic model of sustainable development that would distance itself from the present model committed to economic growth (e.g. Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Elsen, 2011a; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012b; Peeters, 2012b). There is even evidence for a worldwide grass-roots level of communal and ecosocial transition movements (e.g. Transition Network and Transition Town initiatives) which are bringing the ideas into practice (Elsen, 2011a: 12; Hopkins, 2008). Elsen and many other authors (e.g. Coates, 2003; Gray et al., 2012c; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b) find that a radical ecosocial transition of societies is the only real option, as there is hardly any trust left in the ability of single reforms to protect humankind from new environmental crises. The core idea of the ecosocial transition is an economic and political model of society based on 'post-growth' or 'degrowth' (cf. degrowth discourse in e.g. Elsen, 2011a; Hopkins, 2008; Jackson, 2009). A striking feature in the international ecosocial debate is that social work has an important contribution to play in the cross-disciplinary search for concrete society models that enhance sustainable development (Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012b).

A societal model and way of life parallel to sustainable development has featured in the public debate since the mid-1980s (cf. World Commission on Environment and Development [WCED], 1987). Even though the concept of sustainable development has received much criticism, it does give an idea of the ultimate goals of environmental policy. The promotion of sustainable development essentially implies a fight against the excessive human-induced burden on nature. Sustainable development is thus concerned with the question of harmonising the close interdependence of nature and humans. Ecological, social and economic sustainability are often seen as parallel ideas, even though ecological sustainability can be regarded as a prerequisite for social and economic interaction. Therefore, humans and the social system formed by institutions should always be seen as parts of the ecosystem. In the same way, the economy has its own limits set by the carrying capacity of the earth, which is why continuous economic growth has been seen as being impossible (Helne et al., 2012; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b).

Broadly interpreted, the ecological critique in social policy and social work challenges people to adopt a new ecocritical paradigm (Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012c: 12–23), one where the consumption of natural resources is significantly reduced, wealth is equally distributed and a new vision is created for the wellbeing of humanity and the planet. This transition calls for changes in all areas of society. The argumentation in the international ecosocial discussion constitutes that social work and social policy must also be involved in the shift away from the growth-oriented direction of development (Gray et al., 2012b; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b). Furthermore, it has been stated in several studies that the current economic system not only causes environmental problems and destroys natural resources, but also continually increases social inequality (e.g. Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012c; IPCC, 2014; Peeters, 2012a).

A dilemma for social work arising from this line of argument is that economic growth and 'prosperity' have been seen as essential foundations for welfare societies and welfare services – the 'surplus' is necessary to fund welfare – and growth is therefore seen as essential for the survival and development of social work itself. But in many wealthy Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, the connection between economic growth and wellbeing has long been questionable and conflicting. Various scientific studies support the so-called Easterlin paradox: when a country has reached a certain income level, the increased purchasing power does not increase people's wellbeing or happiness in the long run (Easterlin, 1974). Besides degrowth, the economic thinking in ecosocial transition also relies on the various developments of the community economy.

For example, the theory of commons developed by Nobel Prize winner Elinor Ostrom (1990; Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003) is based on her studies of the resource governance of the main public goods. She demonstrates that it is not only ethically just but also economically more rational for the material, cultural and social resources needed by everyone (the commons) to be democratically governed by all citizens, instead of being subject to market-based profit-seeking. Not only is the inclusion of all citizens in the use of goods essential, but they must also be included in the governance of these goods, which promotes shared responsibility for the use of the resources. Marketisation and private profit-seeking instead increase inequality, which reduces wellbeing within the entire community or nation and leads to uneconomical use of goods as well as to speculation (Dolsak and Ostrom, 2003).

Furthermore, the criteria for the sustainable management of finances include the requirement that scarce natural resources are only used in order to produce goods that are indispensable for a reasonably good life. Even though the theorisation of ecosocial transition concerns global and national development, its practical implementation models are local. In Europe, particularly in the German- and Flemish-speaking areas, concrete ideas for ecosocial transition in societies have already been developed quite far, as well as Transition movement and Transition Towns in the United Kingdom and the United States (Elsen, 1998, 2011c; Hopkins, 2008; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b). Local communities develop new kinds of living models that aim at self-sufficiency and social justice, as well as at economic and ecological sustainability, in urban and rural communities (e.g. Elsen, 2011c; Shepard, 2012). The concrete projects focus, for instance, on models for a solidarity economy such as cooperatives, microcredits, local currency, foodstuff and commodity production that secure subsistence outside of a monetary economy (*Subsistenzsicherung*), as well as focusing on communal or cooperative-based housing policy (e.g. Elsen, 2011c; Peeters, 2012a, 2012b). In addition, local transition practices target different non-profit material (energy, parks, food supply, traffic), cultural (education and culture, leisure time, sports, spontaneous culture) and social (care, maintenance, counselling, peer support, exchange economy, self-care) infrastructures. These practices also aim at making living conditions socially more equal, which makes them relevant also from the viewpoint of structural social work.

The transdisciplinarity and trans-sectorality of ecosocial transition is not new and is in fact the core of structural social work. Ecosocial transition challenges social work to boldly join the local debate regarding, for example, the economy, housing policy, employment, traffic – and to contribute with its own social expertise. On the other hand, ecosocial transition demands that structural social work take action in order to change the economic paradigm from an unequal, growth-oriented economy to one that promotes a reasonably good life for all. Also the different concrete, collective development projects that aim to maintain public resources by ecosocial transition are highly relevant for structural social work. According to the theoretical understanding of ecosocial transition, socially equal and meaningful development is also ecologically sustainable (e.g. Gray et al., 2012b, 2012c; Hopkins, 2008; Peeters, 2012a).

Environmental justice and social work

The concept of environmental justice included in the analysed ecosocial debate is highly exciting due to its connection with the increasingly addressed issues of human rights and citizens' rights in the global social work agenda (e.g. IASSW et al., 2012). It is the ethical responsibility of social workers to promote social justice and wellbeing at all levels of society (Banks, 2006). The damage caused by climate change, the food crisis and other environmental catastrophes particularly to the most vulnerable population groups and areas, as well as the escalating global competition for natural resources, have forced social work advocates to demand for environmental justice as well. Often the poorest parts of the population have to bear the major consequences of the exploitation of natural resources, too (e.g. Besthorn, 2012; Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Besthorn et al., 2010; Coates, 2003;

Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b; Hetherington and Boddy, 2012; IPCC, 2014; Tester, 2012). A fair distribution of natural resources and living conditions is viewed as a social work issue. The voice of indigenous people is particularly strong here.

In the analysed publications of ecosocial debate in social work, the concept of environmental justice has also been criticised for being overly anthropocentric and for viewing the environment as existing only for human needs. According to Besthorn (2012), we should rather talk about ecological justice or radical ecological justice, in which humanity is viewed as a part of the environment and nature. From the ecocritical viewpoint, social work should be able to define a kind of justice that concerns the entire world, the planet, and not just people (Besthorn, 2012: 32–40). This point of view represents so-called deep justice, which is also seen as a prerequisite for the implementation of ecosocial transition.

We find that it is crucial for structural social work to develop the concepts of environmental and ecological justice together with all their critical dimensions. By doing so, social justice issues are concretely specified as environmental issues as well. For structural social work, this means a broader understanding of justice, one that expands from justice between humans to a new way of thinking about the entire universe. When people are seen as a part of nature, then also nature should be involved in all decision-making about a sustainable future (cf. Närhi, 2004; Haila and Dyke, 2006).

The contribution of the ecosocial framework to structural social work

In its essence, the tradition of structural social work is still more than topical: social work is understood as a critical, emancipatory, structural and political activity that aims to remove unequal structures and to make collective alliances with citizens (e.g. Baldwin, 2011; Lundy, 2004; Mullaly, 2007). In its goal to challenge the mainstream paradigm of social work, the ecosocial framework shares much in common with the critical, structural, radical, indigenous and feminist approaches of the profession. They all reflect the broad understanding of the person-in-environment and the dynamics of power in transactional processes (cf. Matthies and Närhi, 2014; Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012a, 2012c). The ecosocial approach introduces a broad viewpoint that encompasses the idea of humans as parts of nature.

The international ecosocial framework has a lot to offer to the further development of structural social work in future practice. It clarifies the position of structural social work as being both locally involved and globally responsible. The practical conclusions from the global perspective of the ecosocial agenda demand that social work defend the most disadvantaged groups and most vulnerable areas against social and environmental exploitation both locally and globally. The critical reflection of the Western type of social work professionalism demands the inclusion of the ecosocial framework as an essential part of social work education, both as theoretical approaches and practical action models (Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012). In order to understand the grounds of the ecocritical perspective in one's practice, one should be able to see beyond the relationship between humans and the environment to the relationship between culture and nature and what it means in everyday practice in social work. It is a big challenge for social workers to bridge the gap between mainstream case work and the ecocritical perspective. This means understanding case work in the broadest sense of the person-in-environment and even going beyond case work towards more structural and macro-level strategies in social work. In ecosocial practice, one is able to use social work's holistic perspective and tools from case work to group work and from community work to structural and policy practice. The current literature provides several examples of ecosocial work, including working in various disaster situations with families and communities, using nature's healing forces with young offenders, preserving of 'green' space and urban gardening, participating in animal assisted work with the disabled and

advocating the ecosocial dimensions of environmental change (Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b, 2012c).

The cross-sectoral holistic development of ecosocial transition invites structural social work to create concrete projects to support local communities' own initiatives and economic self-sufficiency when facing ecosocial challenges in society. Finally, the agenda of environmental justice leads structural social work to protect the rights and self-determination of indigenous people and the more disadvantaged population groups; it also includes nature as an overall factor in the understanding of the person-in-environment. Moreover, the critical concepts and critical policy related to environmental and ecological justice add new perspectives to structural social work. Local social and physical living conditions can be viewed through the relationship between the individual and society as a continuum of the relationship between the individual and nature. Defending the rights of nature independent of humans is a huge challenge for structural social work. However, for the sake of the entire planet, it is a crucial approach.

We conclude that as environmental issues are ever more substantially related to the core issues of social work concerning equality, justice and the coping of the most disadvantaged members of society, they are strengthening in particular the structural dimensions of social work (Besthorn and Meyer, 2010; Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray et al., 2012b, 2012c; Hetherington and Boddy, 2012).

The ecosocial framework provides structural social work with new perspectives and opportunities to follow the principles of sustainable development. The framework entitles structural social work – more distinctly than before – also to join the tradition of radical social work (cf. Lavalette, 2011) and the international ecocritical stance (Matthies and Närhi, 2014; Gray et al., 2012a).

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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