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Tool



Helping social workers to integrate eco practices in their work

Introduction

There is global consensus that the environmental crisis is intensifying. The increase in greenhouse gas emissions is causing unprecedented rises in temperature. There is more climate variability. At the time of writing, the UK is experiencing heatwaves, wildfires and drought. For the first time on record, temperatures in the UK have exceeded 40°C. The destructive consequences of climate change are evident. Climate change is the defining crisis of our time and, like many other professions, social work will need to change and adapt rapidly in order to respond to these new challenges.

The aim of this practice tool is to introduce practice supervisors to some of the current debates on eco practice in social work. It supports practice supervisors to think about the role social workers can play in addressing the climate crisis.

The tool gives an overview of recent research on social work and environmental issues. Definitions of key terms are provided. The learning tool then invites you as a practice supervisor to reflect on how you can help practitioners to include environmental issues in their practice. A range of practice ideas are discussed along with some inspiring quotes. Practice supervisors are then invited to reflect on the link between social justice and climate justice.

Context

The accelerating environmental crisis is widely considered to be one of the greatest challenges of our time, a global existential threat that requires urgent attention. This is evidenced in, for example, the United Nations' (2015) [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#). The role of social work in responding to this challenge is gradually receiving more attention. Within this context there is a global call for social work to contribute to the efforts required to address environmental issues. Over the last two decades, key international social work organisations have shifted their focus to global issues, including climate change.

One of the 12 [Grand Challenges for Social Work](#) is how to 'create social responses to a changing environment' (Altman & Hohman, 2020). The [Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development](#) was developed jointly by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the Institute for Clinical Social Work (ICSW) (Jones & Truell, 2012). Concerns around environmental issues are central to this document. Thus 'promoting sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development' constitutes one of its four pillars. All three organisations have shown commitment to working in partnership with the United Nations to raise the profile and show the

difference social work can make to deliver the goals of the 2030 Agenda (UNRISD, n.d.). This is reflected in the key themes identified in recent years for the [World Social Work Day](#).

Within the UK there have been some recent developments in this area. The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) issued a statement and action plan on [sustainability, environmental impact and climate justice](#) (BASW, 2021). The organisation has also established a UK Special Interest Group on the Role of Social Workers in Disasters and Emergencies. Professor Lena Dominelli is the Chair of this group and one of the most active social work voices on this topic. She has been representing the profession at the UN Climate Change Conference for over a decade on behalf of the IASSW.

Why is this a social work issue?

Many organisations and writers believe that social work can and should play a crucial role in addressing the climate crisis. Social work is described as transformative and emancipatory. Therefore, social workers are particularly well placed to facilitate transformative change (Boetto, 2017), given the set of values, knowledge and skills they use in their practice.

Social workers frequently see the impact of environmental issues. They often work with the people most likely to be affected by and least able to recover from the impact of environmental degradation or calamities (BASW, 2021). It could be argued that social workers have a professional responsibility and moral obligation to improve the living environment for all (Rambaree, 2020).

There have been several calls to action issued by influential writers in the main environmental social work texts. Professor Dominelli urged social workers to ‘take action that addresses these issues as a strong, united profession that works alongside dispossessed and marginalised people who do not get their share of global resources, despite their limited ecological footprint’ (Dominelli, 2013a, p. 431).

Peeters (2012) argues that issues such as sustainable development should be central to social work practice. Boetto (2017) calls for transformative eco-social change in social work to deal with the contradiction between the profession’s modernist roots and the ethical ground for practice. Rambaree (2020) also highlights the global call for social work to move from an anthropocentric to an eco-centric model through environmental social work.

Reflective questions

- > How do these calls to action challenge your thinking about the role of social workers?
- > To what extent do you believe the climate crisis is something that should concern social workers?
- > What role can individual social workers play in addressing environmental issues?
- > What is the unique contribution that social work, as a profession, could make?

Critical perspectives and debates

While environmental issues are gradually receiving more attention as a social work concern, there have been several key criticisms aimed at the profession. Coates (2005) asserts that environmental issues have mostly remained outside of social work debate. Furthermore, the author claims the profession has become codependent with modern society on the road to environmental ruin, pointing to its failure to challenge the beliefs and processes that support relentless economic development and the exploitation of resources.

Zapf (2010, p. 30) adds that:

‘As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on person-in-environment, social work might be expected to play a leadership role in interdisciplinary efforts to tackle environmental threats to human well-being and continued existence, yet the profession has generally been silent or less than relevant.’

These concerns are shared by other writers, claiming that the profession has been excluded from the global decision-making, planning and programme development to deal with the climate crisis (Kemp, 2011 cited in Alston, 2015).

Boetto (2017) calls our attention to the international definition of social work as an example of how the profession disregarded the environment as a central concern to social work. Other researchers investigated the extent to which environmental concerns were included in three national social work codes of ethics - the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia. They found that such concerns were not represented in the national codes (Bowles et al., 2018). Similar findings were reported by Jones (2013) in relation to social work education. The author conducted a content analysis of online curricula from 27 social work programmes in Australia. The study found limited evidence that topics related to environmental issues were included in the social work courses.

Payne (2020) identifies three key issues that dominate current debates around eco practice. The first issue relates to how to understand eco practice. There are various conceptions of eco practice proposed by different authors. Consequently, there is a confusing range of overlapping concepts and terminology used in the social work literature (see the key terms section below for some examples).

As the author highlights, perhaps the most crucial issue for social workers is how to apply the principles of eco practice in their work. There is still no established practice model. However, there is general agreement among contemporary writers that the ecological systems theory, widely used in social work practice, is not an eco practice theory. Furthermore, there seems to be a disconnection between the practice recommendations found in literature and day-to-day social work practice.

Reflective questions

- > To what extent do you agree with the criticism levelled at social work as a profession?
- > What, if anything, should the code of practice for social workers include in relation to environmental issues?
- > How might you support social workers to integrate environmental considerations in their daily practice?

Key terms

Environmental social work is an approach and perspective that aims to promote ecological and environmental sustainability and justice (Rambaree, 2020).

Eco practice aims to tackle environmental injustice by supporting people's ability to respond to and understand environmental challenges and transitions. The practice stems from an attempt to champion a social work role that provides solutions to current environmental concerns. (Payne, 2020).

Green social work is a form of holistic professional social work practice that focuses on the interdependencies between people, social groups, institutions and the physical environment. It aims to achieve environmental justice and fight environmental injustice by supporting people to take action to protect their physical environments (Dominelli, 2013a). (A full version of the definition is provided in Dominelli, 2013.)

Environmental injustice is defined by Dominelli (2014, p. 339) as 'society's failure to ensure the equitable distribution of the Earth's resources in meeting human needs, simultaneously providing for the well-being of people and planet Earth today and in the future.'

The IFSW (n.d.) describes **climate injustice** as follows:

*'While the climate crisis impacts all of us, those who are marginalised or oppressed are experiencing it to an even greater extent, creating **climate injustice** for people and our planet. Much of the burden of unsustainable consumption patterns has fallen disproportionately on the most vulnerable people in the world, who typically have the smallest consumption patterns. In addition, these vulnerable people receive fewer of the benefits of the environmental resources. These collective patterns of unsustainable consumption contribute to the climate crisis, making it a global justice issue for people and the planet, this is known as **climate injustice**.'*

Tool 1: areas of involvement for social work

This tool will encourage you to think of some practical steps that you, as a practice supervisor, can take to encourage reflection and action on environmental social work.

Payne (2020) proposes three areas of practice where social workers could play a role:

- 1. Environmental degradation**, deterioration of infrastructure and amenities impacting families and communities. Many vulnerable groups that are supported by social workers live in areas affected by high levels of air pollution. Children are particularly vulnerable to toxic air. Air pollution is linked to **cot deaths, stunted lung growths, obesity, and mental health problems** (see the videos recommended under tool 3 for more information on this). Social workers are encouraged to consider the impact of these factors in their assessments.
- 2. Environmental hardship**, shortage of resources generating difficulties for individuals, families and social groups. For example, social workers are likely to work with people living in highly urbanised or degraded environments. Families may not have access to green spaces. There may be limited opportunities to benefit from the positive impact of nature. By increasing access to outdoor space, social workers can contribute to improving people's mental health and integration within the community.
- 3. Environmental transition**, supporting the move to a new social agreement by connecting environmental, economic and social changes. The aim is to promote holistic wellbeing, de-growth policies, reduced consumption and a shared economy. Social workers can play a role by helping the people they work with to redefine the elements considered essential for wellbeing and quality of life (e.g. clean water and fresh air). Practitioners can provide information and raise awareness of the impact of over-consumption and over-production.

Reflective questions

- > Think about some of the families your team currently supports. How are they affected by environmental degradation and / or hardship?
- > For developing eco practice, how might you help social workers to better understand the impact of environmental issues on children's development and on parents' parenting capacity?

Boetto (2016; 2017) suggests a range of helpful eco practice strategies that social workers could integrate in their everyday practice. The key message for practitioners is to develop their awareness of actions they can take to integrate environmental and sustainability concerns in their work. Below you can find some suggestions, drawing on Boetto's theories.

Use the natural environment in social work interactions

Think about ways to integrate the natural environment in interactions with children and families. Could some meetings or direct work sessions take place in a natural setting? Consider a walk in the local park during visits.

Recent research highlights the benefits of engaging with children, young people and families in this way. Social workers had to adapt and embrace such practices during the Covid-19 pandemic (Ferguson et al., 2022). Before the pandemic most of the interactions with families took place inside their home. Due to lockdown restrictions, there was a shift to using open spaces near the family home, including gardens and

parks. The use of other environments offered practitioners new spaces and opportunities to connect and communicate with children and their families. Practitioners interviewed by the researchers reported that children, young people and parents felt more relaxed and able to share during meetings that took place in open spaces.

As the researchers point out, these walking interactions with families offer ‘a form of “side-by-side” communication that is highly productive’. They further advise that ‘the effects also of being directly in nature while walking must not be underestimated.’ (Ferguson et al., 2022, p. 18)

Include environmental considerations in assessments

Are there any issues linked to environmental degradation or hardship? Is there any risk from environmental hazards near to home? Are there any health problems due to a poor environment? Is the insulation in the house adequate? This could have a significant impact on how much gas and / or electricity the family needs to use and, consequently, on their budget.

Use the positive impact of the natural environment in interventions

- > Help children and young people to learn sustainable living skills and engage in outdoor activities.
- > Promote young people's wellbeing and self-esteem through volunteering. They could be encouraged to volunteer for environmental projects (e.g. at local Wildlife Trusts or city farms).
- > Support families to spend more time in the natural environment.
- > Consider [eco-therapies](#) for addressing issues experienced by children and families.
- > Provide access to animal-assisted therapies.
- > Help families to reduce social isolation and develop local support networks. They could become involved in community-based planning groups or community gardening.
- > Empower marginalised groups within the community. Link families with other support groups affected by similar issues (e.g. air pollution, poor housing).
- > Provide guidance and education on sustainable living.

Reflective questions for supervisors

- > What would you need to consider in your role as practice supervisor?
- > How might you bring these practice interventions to the attention of your team?
- > Can you think of any different questions you might ask in supervision to encourage social workers to integrate environmental issues in their assessments and interventions?
- > What steps could you take within your role to encourage social workers to include eco-practice strategies in their work?

Dominelli (2013b, p. 438) suggests a number of diverse roles that green practitioners promoting environmental justice could adopt, including:

- > facilitator and coordinator
- > community and resource mobiliser (think of the positive role social work undertook during the COVID-19 pandemic)
- > negotiator or broker between communities and different levels of government
- > mediator between conflicting interests and groups, including gendered relations

- > consultant to government and other agencies
- > advocate for people's rights and entitlements (human rights are central to social work practice and many human rights are affected by climate change, including the right to life, health, development, food, water and sanitation)
- > educator, giving out information about how to access relief aid and avoid diseases that can erupt following a disaster
- > trainer, particularly in how to respond effectively in mobilising local resources when disaster strikes
- > therapist helping people deal with the emotional consequences of disaster (social workers are trauma-informed – this is important when thinking about environmental impact).

Reflective questions for supervisors

- > Review the roles listed above. How could you model these as a leader?
- > How could you help staff to prepare for and undertake these roles?
- > What opportunities or barriers could you or your team members encounter in undertaking these roles?

Tool 2: reimagining social work - inspiring quotes for discussion

The quotes below can be used to generate a conversation in group supervision or team meetings. You can engage team members in a discussion about reimagining the role of social work:

'In promoting and enhancing environmental justice, green social work practice is also good social work practice that draws on empowering values and skills. Hence, environmentally just, green social work practice lies at the heart of the profession.'
(Dominelli 2013b, p. 438)

'Environmental exploitation encourages a critique of modernity and of the role which social work can play in our society. An understanding of the connectedness and interdependence of all things provides a strong foundation for proactive efforts toward personal and social transformation. The social work profession is challenged to expand its educational and practice endeavors to include such issues as environmental exploitation, pollution, and globalisation.'
(Coates, 2005, p. 42)

'Many authors agree that eco-social work is more than an add-on or expansion of existing social work approaches (Gray & Coates, 2015). It is argued that simply adding the natural environment to existing social work approaches sustains the dominant modernist paradigm, which invariably contributes to the exploitation of the natural environment. In contrast, eco-social work involves a paradigmatic shift in understanding about the place of humans in the natural world.'
(Boetto, 2017, p. 50)

'What these authors share (...) is the belief that environmental sustainability is, in addition to theoretical and practical dimensions, an ethical issue. This raises the question of whether and how environmental sustainability and concern for the natural environment are incorporated into current statements of social work ethics. It also raises the question of whether the profession's notions of justice can be expanded to more fully include the natural world.' (Bowles et al., 2018, p. 506)

Reflective questions for team discussion

- > Look at these quotes. What words or phrases particularly strike you? How do they relate to social work values?
- > Child and family social work is about a better future for children and young people. How is this related to the environment – on both practical and psychological levels?
- > What key actions could you take in order to integrate environmental issues in your own and your team's practice?

Tool 3: climate justice and social justice

As discussed earlier, there is a link between climate justice and social justice. This section encourages you to further reflect on how these two

issues are related. Please watch these TedTalks and then consider the questions below:

- > [David Lammy: Climate justice can't happen without racial justice](#)
- > [Rosamund Adoo-Kissi-Debrah: The tragedy of air pollution - and an urgent demand for clean air](#)

Reflective questions for team discussion

- > What resonated with you from these videos?
- > How could you take forward key messages from the two speakers in your role as practice supervisor?
- > What action could you take to challenge climate and social injustice within your role?
- > How could you support your staff to address these issues?
- > What discussions could you have with staff in supervision to explore issues of equity, diversity and inclusion relating to climate injustice?
- > How could you share these ideas with your team members?

Other ways to use this practice tool

- > Organise a team development session using some of the knowledge and reflections in this practice tool.
- > Encourage team members to reflect individually on some of the questions included in this practice tool.
- > Show one or both videos at a team session, discuss their messages, and ask your team to consider what they could do differently.

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