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SOCIAL WORK EDUCATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPORTANCE AND RELEVANCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

It is well known that the effects of climate change and especially environmental inequality are amplified for people who live in poverty or who are marginalised. Social workers internationally and nationally are therefore becoming duty-bound to engage with the issue of environmental social work. This qualitative study used a descriptive design to explore and describe the perceptions of social work educators of the importance and relevance of environmental social work in South Africa. Purposive sampling was used to sample six social work educators from different universities. Semi-structured interviews were incorporated to obtain the data, which was thematically analysed. The results indicated that social work educators perceived ESW as important and relevant, and indicated that ways of integrating it into the social work curriculum should be explored further.

Keywords: environmental social work; sustainability; climate change; environmental degradation; social work curriculum; environmental justice; green social work

INTRODUCTION

Human-induced climate change is arguably the most severe crisis facing humanity, with scientists in agreement that it is happening already, and that it is impacting severely on humankind and the planet (US Global Change Research Program, 2017). However, despite social work's interest in the person within the environment, social work has been slow in taking up a role to address environmental matters (Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012) and has been hesitant to participate in public discourse around the issue of human-induced climate change (Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). This is notwithstanding the fact that environmental issues are included by the social work profession

through the promotion of environmental and community sustainability, which aligns with goals set out in the Global Agenda for social workers (Jones, 2018; Lombard, 2015). The inclusion of environment issues further aligns with the 2030 United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015), which is seen as building on the Millennium Development Goals (UN, 2000) and designed to achieve those goals. It is therefore a matter of concern that social work has not yet made significant contributions to the discourses around environmental matters.

Holbrook, Akbar and Eastwood (2019) are of the opinion that for social work to take its rightful place in environmental matters demands an across-the-board shift in social work education (Lombard, 2015). For this reason, these authors argue that *environmental social work (ESW)* must be incorporated into the core curricula, with social work skills being developed to include questions of environmental justice. The dilemma that social work seems to find itself in is that, although the mandate to be environmentally proactive may be clear, its application for social work academics is still limited (Dominelli, 2014). Since there is a dearth of literature in this regard in South Africa (Lombard, 2015; Shokane & Nel, 2017), this research project is designed to explore and describe the perceptions of social work educators of the importance and relevance of ESW within the South African context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In the past four years, ground-breaking scientific reports have been released which have all called for urgent action to be taken to mitigate the impact of climate change. These reports include:

- The 2018 United Nations (UN) Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) results obtained from research undertaken and peer-reviewed by thousands of scientists worldwide (Scholes, Scholes & Lucas, 2015);
- A 2019 report signed by 11 000 scientists (Ripple, Wolf, Newsome, Barnard & Moomaw, 2020);
- A 2018 *Lancet* report drawing attention to major threats to human health and wellbeing (Watts *et al.*, 2018).

From the above reports and the many other peer-reviewed scientific data which have now become available on an almost daily basis, it could be concluded that humankind is probably fighting its most significant existential battle yet (Arkert & Jacobs, 2021).

Scholes *et al.* (2015) remind one that there is already a warming trend apparent in Southern Africa which is twice the average rate so far recorded worldwide. Southern Africa has consequently been declared a hot spot and has already suffered ruinous droughts during the period 2017 to 2020 (Bloom, 2020). Humans, animals, and plant species are also increasingly being confronted with new diseases and pest infestations.

Scientists, at Wits University's Global Change Institute, have identified five climate risks facing South Africa in the 21st century (Bloom, 2020). It is predicted that these risks will only intensify since climate change does not take place in a vacuum. These risks include:

- Food insecurity and decreased viability of the agricultural sector, which could result in the disappearance of farming areas;
- Risks related to water insecurity such as shortages of clean water, which could impact on low-income urban populations and cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg;
- A badly handled transition to a low-carbon economy and risks related to the energy system, which could, amongst other things, lead to
 - job losses;
 - a decline in export revenues;
 - an increase of incoming migrants, which could put further pressure on already overwhelmed housing, healthcare and public services;
- Killer heat stress, which will hold specific risks for human health and wellbeing, especially to children, the elderly and people who live in poverty or who are marginalised;
- Disrupted ecosystems and loss of biodiversity, which will compromise the stability of the ecosystem. This will
 - affect provision of food and clean water;
 - increase the numbers and impact of pests and diseases, and
 - disrupt the regulation of the climate itself (Bloom, 2020).

Authors agree that it is people who live in poverty or who are marginalised that will be most affected by climate change (Bloom, 2020; Dominelli, 2014; Philip & Reisch, 2015). It has therefore become inevitable that social work as a profession, which acts as an advocate for these communities, familiarise itself with and become involved in actions taken against climate change in South Africa.

It is assumed that social work practitioners will come to know how to deal with issues pertaining to climate change through their training, either on an undergraduate or postgraduate level. The social work profession globally has, however, been slow to address issues pertaining to climate change or to adopt the principles of ecological social work (Besthorn, 2012; Coates & Gray, 2012; Lysack, 2012; Ramsay & Boddy 2017). Millar and Hayward (2014) argue that the lack of environmental content in social work education worldwide is the result of a lack of environmental literacy.

The lack of environmental content in social work training in South Africa could be attributed to the fact that social work education in South Africa is positioned within the framework of Western modernism, colonialism, and racist capitalism (Qalinge & van Breda, 2018). Social work as a result has up to now formed part of a system that attaches importance to the values of a neoliberal, materialistic, human-centred (anthropocentric), individualistic, clinical and modernistic paradigm (Dominelli, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013). These modernist Western foundations have reinforced the separation between traditional social work and the natural

environment and undermined the interconnectedness of the natural environment and humans (Alston & Besthorn, 2012).

Social work, however, faces a major challenge in reconstructing its theoretical basis if it is to transcend these limitations and overcome the limits of modernism (Boetto & Bell, 2015). Ramsay and Boddy's (2017) concept analysis of ESW in this regard becomes especially useful in attempting to affirm why social workers should be engaging with ESW, and what its key attributes are. Ramsey and Boddy (2017) used an inductive literature analysis of 97 publications and categorised them as follows: environmental social work, green social work, eco-feminist social work, spiritual and eco-spiritual social work, ecological social work, sustainable social work, and other categories including natural, speciesism and climate change. In their analysis Ramsay and Boddy (2017) came to the conclusion that social workers are duty bound and obligated to care for the environment for the following reasons:

- They are being compelled to do so by higher authorities such as professional associations and bodies, for example, the UN, and the Global Agenda for Social Work (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW, 2018; IPCC, 2018; Jones, 2018) to care for the environment;
- Social workers are becoming morally obliged to integrate ecological and environmental justice into their theory and practice (Besthorn & Meyer, 2010; Dominelli, 2012; Dylan & Coates, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013);
- Scientific evidence about the impact of climate change and environmental destruction specifically on people who live in poverty or who are marginalised is now irrefutable (Dominelli, 2012; du Plessis, 2019);
- Lastly, there is now more than ever a growing awareness of the interrelationships between humans and the biosphere (Besthorn & Meyer, 2010; Dominelli, 2014; Gray & Coates, 2012; Hawkins, 2010; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013).

In their concept analysis Ramsey and Boddy (2017:70) defined ESW practice as:

assisting humanity to create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem using core social work values, skills and knowledge which can be adapted to promote social change and helping practitioners to respond to and mitigate environmental degradation and climate change.

The two fundamental values which are at the heart of the social work profession are human rights and social justice (Gilliomme & Lombard, 2020; Herrero & Charnley, 2019). It is believed that a third fundamental value has been added to what the social work professions should advocate for in the light of the definition of ESW, and that is environmental justice (Dominelli, 2014). It is therefore suggested that the environment should have an essential and fundamental place in social work theory, ethics and practice if we are to be part of the attempt to mitigate one of the most serious threats to humankind and the natural world (Bloom, 2020; Gray & Coates, 2016). EWS can be seen as a critical, decolonising practice that embodies the heart of social work practice, which is social justice, human rights and environmental justice.

The study is therefore grounded in the basic principles and values of two approaches, namely Max-Neef's (1991) human scale development model and Boetto's (2017) transformative eco-social model. Both models argue that there needs to be a more inclusive and caring mode as well as a paradigm shift away from a modernist, patriarchal and neoliberal approach, which they both argue has been the major cause of the environmental damage and its impact on people who live in poverty or who are marginalised. They both are of the opinion that it is critical for humankind to move away from an anthropogenic worldview towards an ecologically-centred worldview, and that without this shift, addressing the impacts of the global environmental crisis will be impossible (Boetto, 2017; Max-Neef, 2010). Both Max-Neef (2010) and Boetto (cited in Powers, Schmitz & Moritz, 2019) also call for decolonisation of the curriculum, and for taking greater cognisance of indigenous wisdom in the future.

Social work education globally has regrettably up to now only mirrored the split between the natural environment and humans that modernism has brought about (Shaw, 2013). Boetto and Bell (2015:460), however, believe that a 'bolt-on' approach can play a role by "introducing ecological content into social work curricula within a relatively short time frame". A 'bolt-on' approach might be what is needed if social work is serious about beginning to address the impact of climate change on people who live in poverty or who are marginalised.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach and a qualitative descriptive design were used for the research study (Hesse-Biber, 2017). The purpose of descriptive research is to describe the current situation as it is perceived at the time of the study (Salkind, 2014; Sandelowski, 2009). This study examined the perceptions of social work academics of ESW.

A non-probability purposive sampling method (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Salkind, 2014) was used to select social work academics involved in undergraduate and postgraduate teaching. According to a purposive sampling method, the sample is first selected based on the characteristics of a population and, secondly, on the objective of the study (Maree & Pietersen, 2016). The inclusion criteria were social work educators who had some knowledge of environmental social work.

For the purposes of this study, six social work educators from different universities were interviewed, representing six from a possible 16 social work programs in South Africa. There are different points of view on when data saturation has been reached in qualitative research. In one study by Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) saturation occurred once 12 interviews had been analysed. Another view is that the quality of the data collected and the variability of important events are more important than the number of participants (Malterud, Siersma & Guassora, 2016). Tracey (2010) maintains that rigour is one of the important marks of qualitative research. She thus argues that there is no perfect amount of data that needs to be collected, but that the amount is dependent on the nature of each research study and on how much data is needed. What seems to be important is the care with which data have been collected and the level of analysis (Tracey, 2010). It is therefore believed that six interviews were adequate as a starting point for the purposes of this study.

Semi-structured interviews of about an hour in length were conducted, either face to face or online via Skype interviews. Each interview was recorded, with the consent of the participants, and then transcribed.

The following questions formed part of the interview schedule:

- What is your understanding of ESW?
- What are your perceptions of the importance and relevance of ESW in 21st-century South Africa?
- What are your perceptions on incorporating ESW within social work training/education and social work practice?

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six phases for thematic analysis were adopted to analyse the data. Once the data had been transcribed, each participant was assigned a code to guarantee their anonymity and the confidentiality of the information they shared. During the readings of the transcribed data, initial codes were generated, after which the authors began to identify themes. Potential themes were then reviewed, defined and named. While reviewing and naming the themes, the authors once again read through the transcripts to evaluate whether the themes matched the narratives of what the participants had shared. During this process, member checking was also involved to ascertain that the themes reflected what the participants have shared.

Once ethical clearance was obtained from the Human Research Ethical Committee of the North-West University (NWU-HREC) with the following number NWU-00035-18-S1, 16 universities were approached to obtain goodwill permission for the study to be conducted at their institution. On receiving goodwill permission, the heads of the Social Work departments at the different Social Work schools were requested to extend an invitation to educators who fit the inclusion criteria to participate in the study.

Ethical considerations which received specific attention during the study included participants' privacy, anonymity, and their voluntary participation, as well as treating the collected data and the participants' participation with confidentiality. It is also for this reason that no profile of the participants is presented, as the authors did not want the participants to be identifiable. The risk level of the research project was minimal, as participants' perceptions of the subject were asked for and no personal feelings were disclosed.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the study, Guba and Lincoln's (1994) four constructs of trustworthiness were implemented, namely credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability (Bradshaw, Atkinson & Doody, 2017).

LIMITATIONS

The fact that only six educators participated in the study, is viewed as a huge limitation as it did not allow for a firm conclusion on the perceptions of social work educators regarding the importance and relevance of ESW with South Africa. The small number of educators who did participate could be attributed to many different factors and may be of significance in itself, as ESW currently does not seem an important part of most universities' curricula. Data saturation however was still achieved and valuable information elicited, despite the small sample size.

FINDINGS

The data revealed that social work educators perceive ESW to be important and relevant to the social work profession, that ESW is sufficiently important and relevant to be incorporated into social work practice, and that ESW is sufficiently important and relevant to be incorporated into social work training. In this section these three themes are subsequently presented and discussed.

Social work educators perceive ESW as important and relevant to the social work profession

For the participants, ESW aligns with the third pillar of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development, namely *promoting community and environmental sustainability* (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW, 2018). Promoting community and environmental sustainability further aligns with the focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which recognises that people and the planet are both important for sustainable development (UN, 2015). The diminishment of natural resources and the harmful effects of environmental degradation and climate change destabilise and weaken the ability of all countries to reach appropriate levels of sustainable development (Lombard, 2015). Social workers should be seen to be advocates for social and environmental justice, and as committed to being part of a sustainable development plan (Dominelli, 2012; Hawkins, Fook & Ryan, 2001; Jones, 2018).

Participant 6 affirmed that:

When the Global Agenda for sustainable development became a reality worldwide, that is when the environment came to the foreground, we wrote the African report ... about what social workers and social development practitioners are doing ... so South Africa's got a long way to go to get that awareness of environmental matters. The people and the planet both matter. So, if you neglect the one, there won't be a planet and there won't be people. Because we kill the oceans, we're supposed to eat those fish. We are killing ecosystems ... throughout. And humans are responsible.

Participant 3 likewise referred to the Global Agenda:

As human beings and advocates, social workers must begin to be part of the Global Agenda, this is something that comes up quite frequently. There is this new emerging understanding that issues of climate and how it impacts on the environment are also part of this new agenda of social work and the environment.

Participant 3 went further by stating that:

... we only have this world. The earth, this environment. So, if you look at the floods, the heat, it's going to affect future generations, not only human beings but animals ... not to look only at what is happening now, what is going to happen in the future.

Participants seem to agree that social workers as advocates for social and environmental justice are obliged to care for the environment through the support and leadership of higher authorities such as professional associations and bodies, for example the UN, and the Global Agenda for Social Work (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW, 2018; IPCC, 2018; Jones, 2018).

During data collection participants frequently commented on how ESW is incorporated into social work values, principles, responsibilities and skills. Participants, for instance, seemed to agree that the issue of social work and ESW is a rights-based matter (Gilliomée & Lombard, 2020). Participant 2 mentioned:

... climate change is a rights-based issue. But more importantly it is a social justice issue. I look at social justice as encompassing environmental, economic justice, etc. ... I will give you an example of what is just transpiring right now. The high levels of carbon emissions from the richer countries have unfortunately impacted on the less developed countries and I will give you an example, ... what is happening in the Sahel, Mali, Mauritania, that whole area. Senegal, parts of Northern Ghana, Northern Burkina Faso ... you'll find that former pastoralists and agriculturalists are now without livelihoods because the whole area has become dryer and the desert has encroached ...

The knock-on effect of these social and economic injustices is that the people from these areas migrate to Europe, which in turn creates certain human rights dilemmas.

Participant 6 linked environmental justice to human rights (Gray & Coates, 2012) and stated:

... social justice without environmental justice cannot be social justice. ... it's more about having a clear mandate as environmental social workers to advocate for environmental justice. It is not only the people residing in a particular place but also an injustice against the environment we are trying to protect.

Participant 4, who works with issues of waste and waste pickers, highlights the human rights abuses and the social and environmental justice issues which, according to Teixeira and Krings (2015), are at play around this phenomenon. Participant 4 makes an interesting contribution by stating that people who pick up waste are not only trying to make a living, but they are helping to deal with the massive environmental degradation that waste is causing in South Africa. Participant 4 further mentioned:

I can see what a landfill can mean to people, there is a lot more than recycling going on. In the afternoons mothers and children will come and look for food.

Participant 4 for this reason feels that landfills should be better organised and could be a place where people could, for instance, drop off wood and people in need of wood could collect it at the landfill. Other possibilities, according to Participant 4, could be that “One can drop off clothes rather than just throw (them) away” or “organics can be used to make compost” at the landfills. Participant 4 is of the opinion that addressing social justice issues such as these falls completely within the scope of practice and skills of the social work profession.

As an example of how social work skills came into practice during times of disasters such as floods and severe storms, Participant 1 mentioned the following:

... you incorporate a number of skills, depending on which one is relevant. Remember people will be displaced from the homes, ... there will be no proper sanitation, people

may have cholera, ... Some of the people do not even have food to eat because of the flooding. [In a situation like this] we would liaise with government.

Participant 3 likewise refer to how social work skills and knowledge can be applied to ESW:

[t]he core values and skills and ethics of our (social work) profession is to educate and mobilise people to be aware of the impact they have on the environment and the impact the environment has on them. We have narrowed towards a certain corner in our practice and particularly to child protection services. That is what we are confined to. But the amazing thing about our profession is that it almost ... fits everywhere ... social workers see themselves as somehow specialists in crisis intervention, this would require some level of trauma counselling, but it goes beyond that. We have community work skills. After the crisis, we need to say okay ... the community has to be rebuilt, what programs and projects can we set up as social workers ... how to treat water shortages ... or that people survive during the drought. Social workers are not just seen as child removers, but social workers have community problems at heart, and are able to work with the community.

The advocacy skills that social workers possess to act in the best interest of their clients were further elaborated upon by Participant 3:

If you are talking about the advocacy part of being a social worker, they could also tap into indigenous knowledge, as ways of making sure that people don't follow practices that exacerbate environmental degradation. Having [an] ESW repertoire and justice would easily predispose social workers to advocate on behalf of communities and inform government what needs to be done.

Participants state that ESW is about raising awareness, which is another social work skill, along with the need to make connections between what we are doing to the environment and what is happening. Participant 3 made the case in the following manner:

[w]hat I am trying to drive at is that people are more concerned about other challenges, about the status quo ... people are not connecting how things are happening ... We need to understand ... the impact of climate change, how it's going to affect people. People need to be educated, so that they're ready and that they understand and can do something about it.

The view that social workers should be able to easily adopt ESW practices is summarised by the comments of the following two participants. Participant 3 believes:

... there is not any other profession that is as special, as comprehensive in terms of its understanding, and in terms of the vast skills that you acquire (as a social worker).

This thought was confirmed by Participant 6, who added:

I am one of those believers that social workers can and are engaged in everything. Because life happens and changes and that is why it's so hard to say what social work is about, what a social worker does because it is changing with society all the time.

ESW adopts core social work methods, values, skills and knowledge to enable practitioners to respond to and alleviate environmental degradation and mitigate the impact of climate change (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017).

In the second theme social work educators' perceptions of how ESW can be implemented in social work practice are explored.

Social work educators perceive ESW sufficiently important and relevant to be incorporated into social work practice

The participants were clear on the fact that practising ESW can only be successful when it is done in collaboration with different professions and governmental departments.

Social workers cannot be out there without working with say geologists, you know, all sorts of specialists. I think that the big thing is also that natural scientists start moving, working with social scientists. Social workers can be so respected for what they bring into it. (Participant 6)

Participant 4 is of the opinion that because social workers “have a connection to each and every profession” that they in fact “can become the hub in [dealing with] environmental issues”. This participant went further to say:

We don't have the technical knowledge necessarily, but we can bring people together. That is the exciting part. In my work, I literally need everybody, I ask people to please come and work with me; environmental science, law students, economics students, business studies ... An engineering student. They are all from different universities, and I have two social work students as well. It's so exciting.

Participant 1 highlights an equally important collaboration in that social workers need to also work with different government departments:

We need to be aware of various government departments and how we can connect to them, and other organisations such as UNICEF, or the World Health Organisation, how we're connected with them and what role we can play.

Even though there are social workers who already are exposed to working with different disciplines, Participant 2 points out that social workers should also know whom to collaborate with, when and why in order to address specific needs of the clients:

One should not just talk about responding to deprivation and deficits, but you are talking about now using systems [such as education, health care, housing, sanitation] ... to respond to particular sets of needs. That would also raise the quality of life of the people. Social workers need to be exposed to this broader conceptualisation of issues, such as ... agriculture, sanitation, or the environment.

Participants are also of the opinion that social workers need to become involved in informing policy for ESW to form part of the scope of practice of social work (Noyoo, 2015). Participant 2 strongly feels that “social policies should be within our domain as social workers” and that

at a policy and advocacy level social workers “can play those dual roles in the area of climate change and begin to amplify the rights issues and social and environmental justice issues.”

Participant 6, however, believes that social workers are not as involved on a policy level as they should be, despite the pressing need for this, and mentioned: “I think we can go a long way to shape our skills of influencing policy and challenging policy”.

Social workers’ apathy or lack of interest in informing policy could perhaps explain why social work as a profession has not yet joined the discourse on all levels around climate change and its consequences for humans and the planet alike (Noyoo, 2015).

Social work educators perceive ESW sufficiently important and relevant to be incorporated into social work training

Participants seem to have specific views about incorporating ESW into social work training. Participants, however, concurred – in accordance with Besthorn (2012), Dominelli (2012), Fogel, Barkdull and Weber (2015) and Gray and Coates (2013) – that a paradigm shift in social work is needed when it comes to ESW. For Participant 6:

The paradigm shift that is needed is the shift to an ecological perspective. We have focused too long on the social environment; now we need to see the physical environment too. The shift acknowledges that the planet and the people are both equally important. For too long we thought people were more important than the rest, but that’s where we made a mistake, because the planet is collapsing.

A part of the paradigm shift that ESW necessitates in social work training (Gray & Coates, 2015), is to include and give recognition to existing indigenous knowledge, the principles of ubuntu and the discourse around decolonisation. Baskin (2016), Boetto (2017), Harms-Smith and Nathane (2018), Mogorosi and Thabedy (2018), Ross (2018), and Shokane and Masoga (2018) specifically consider the incorporation of indigenous knowledge into social work training as vital. For Participant 3 this will involve:

...skills to facilitate discussions with indigenous communities. Not only coming up with knowledge to educate them but having an understanding of how they see things.

Participant 3 is further of the opinion that:

...if we are pushing environmental social work, we need to understand that we are not going to be dealing only with urban environmental awareness, but with rural environmental awareness too. Because in the rural area they understand and treat the environment differently to what an urbanite would. I think it is essential to find indigenous ways of promoting environmental awareness and finding indigenous ways in which we can prevent harmful practices in the environment. I do think that it could be done in the spirit of understanding of the existence of parallel knowledge systems and understanding on how each could contribute within the fight to achieve a solution.

The comment by Participant 3 resonates with a discussion by Shokane and Masoga (2018) on how important the mainstreaming of indigenous knowledge systems in Southern Africa is to

social work education and environmental sustainability. Shokane and Masoga (2018:1) refer to the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), which “acknowledges the importance of indigenous knowledge, cultures and traditional practices for sustainable and equitable development and the proper management of the environment”.

Participant 2 finds the discussions on including and recognising indigenous knowledge to form part of a paradigm shift in social work training “quite ironic” and mentions how people across Southern Africa have “for centuries” already had “certain practices that help in maintaining the eco-balance.” The participant shares another example of how people over the centuries have protected and maintained the eco-balance:

But part of their repertoire is that they have got cultural taboos with certain species, even before colonisation, that you don't decimate the female of the species. And it is ingrained in their indigenous systems. And when the adventurers and the colonisers came, they just decimated everything. I find it fascinating because it's not codified but it's embedded in the values and the systems. For a long time taboos were almost deterrents, and so how do you take that kind of thinking, the knowledge and then redefine it for a different, modernised Africa? ... and those [values] fit quite easily into climate change and protection of the environment. (Participant 2)

A paradigm shift in social work training for Participant 5 will involve pushing “ubuntu theory as a theory for social practice” and “to take it beyond just the idea that I can ask my neighbour for sugar when I run short”. The participant went further to explain that:

... in traditional African culture and spirituality particularly, the earth is regarded as a living being in much the same way that a person is a living being. And that we have to regard the earth as a member of our community so that we're part of collective communities. The earth is not fundamentally separate or different from who we are. It is part of our community in the same way that my sister or my mother is. And ... the ubuntu philosophy could in practice, ... serve as quite a useful indigenous framework to ground the importance of a green social work and a greater earth consciousness amongst people living in Africa. (Participant 5)

Becoming aware of this type of indigenous knowledge and practices around sustainability and environmental issues highlights the importance to incorporate a paradigm shift in social work training in order to give ESW its rightful place in social work.

Participants were specific about incorporating ESW on an undergraduate and postgraduate level. Participant 2 mentioned that their department has already introduced considerations of climate change and environmental social work into the social work training, saying it is done in an integrated way and not as a specific area of specialisation as such.

Participant 6 explains how they have started to include ESW into their undergraduate and postgraduate social work training:

Where we have projects, we started to mention to the first- and second-year students that they need to become aware of this issue in the community. But it is already written into the curriculum in the fourth year in the social development module where we talk

about green social work a little bit, it is very introductory. We need more. One of my own social workers, a 4th year, works in a community here, a township with a beautiful school, and they had problems also with water and access and taps, so they took these huge white containers, filled with water and then you just put a tap in. Now they can wash their hands, have their drinking water, all classes have that. ... So, we are shifting. Slowly.

Participant 6 reminds one that social work students throughout South Africa are trained “in general social work” and as such:

...it will not be a specialised focus for any specific area ... it should not be. There are professional standards of the Council for Higher Education – so it is the professional standards for BSW [Bachelor of Social Work].

Participant 6 mentioned that ESW is already “full blast” part of their Master’s programme and is incorporated in the following way:

I actually start in the two social development modules. The first one I’ve already started working it [in] because when I explain what’s developmental social work, I do it from a sustainable development framework. And then the second one is mostly about socio-economic and environmental issues. I think it fits very well in a Master’s in Social Developmental Policy. Because for me, it is part of it.

ESW has also been introduced in two streams of the social work curriculum at the university where Participant 2 works, namely in the Bachelor of Social Work degree and as a major in social development. Participant 2 mentions that ESW is incorporated into modules such as development planning, social policy and comparative social policy in Africa. The participant explains that:

In those courses ... we teach those issues of climate change, the environment issues and xenophobia, over and above your traditional challenges of social problems. So why are we doing this, we’re saying you need to have multiple lenses on social policy as a comprehensive holistic process that is a vehicle towards the realisation of social development ... And the environment features prominently ... (Participant 2)

ESW does not yet form part of the curriculum of the university where Participant 1 teaches, but the participant suggested ideas on how ESW could be included on an undergraduate level in community, group and casework. The participant mentioned, for instance, that students could be allowed to visit communities that are specifically affected by environmental change, “So that they could see and understand for themselves” what ESW could be about.

Participant 3 likewise saw the need to introduce ESW in the future:

... because we are experiencing climate-related problems now, we can’t wait for the next twenty years to do something. We need to do something now. We need to be able to train our social workers on how to respond to flooding locations or respond to those who are struggling to survive in a drought. What is their role within that, and how to educate those people to be able to actually understand how to deal with these

issues? If we don't respond now, we'll always feel that we are not relevant in this context. We always say it is the Department of Land Affairs that should be responsible. But it is because we're not teaching our students. And I'm saying we need to do it, we need to do it now.

Participant 3 furthermore observed that ESW could provide employment opportunities for social work graduates:

At present there's about two thousand or even more social workers that are not employed, and if we were to address some of those problems, I think that environmental social work is probably one of the closest solutions to help us addressing that. If we are being intentional, we need to put it as a requirement when students graduate. They need to have knowledge about environmental issues. And they must be able to demonstrate somehow competence and be able to start projects that are related to that. And I assure you, within five, ten years we will have environmental social workers running up and down, because they are actually graduating with knowledge, skills and techniques in terms of how to do the work.

Although participants perceived ESW to be important and relevant, Social Work departments seem to be reluctant to incorporate it into the social work curriculum. Participant 4 tried to explain why she thought this was the case:

I don't want to excuse the universities, but ... my experience here at the university [is], if you don't personally drive that process of becoming environmentally involved, it won't happen. I think the problem is the universities are so focused on the degree, that [they] are so prescriptive, that they actually don't have the energy and the time to move beyond that. Because at the moment ... degrees are so structured and ... full of the basic social work stuff ... [in order] to get ... the basic [social work] skills ...

For Participant 3 the reason why ESW is not included in their training lies in the fact that at present social workers already have “massive” issues to deal with such as child protection, violence, gangsterism, mental health, and so forth. Participant 3 mentions:

... simply because we have been in a situation whereby based on our historical background in South Africa there are things that we consider as not really important. It is so normalised that no one cares about the environment, ... but we are not even close to have those conversations because there are a lot of other systemic problems. We need to fix them before we move on to environmental issues. But we don't understand the issues and results of climate change, we feel this is out of our control. We need to answer the question as to what the human contribution towards it is. Our problem right now is to address inequalities, poverty etc. ... Looking at our entire curriculum I would say that I do think it is something we should intentionally be focusing on. But it will be something that we will touch [on] as we go along to teaching future social workers ... We have so many massive things that we really have to deal with [now]. The question has to be asked: How can environmental sustainability create job opportunities for social workers?

ESW also does not form part of the curriculum of the university where Participant 5 teaches. From the participant's discussion, it seems as if time is a factor as well as the many other "pressing and imminent" issues that seem to need more attention:

I don't think that we address sustainability very much at all. We certainly don't have any modules that are explicitly directed towards green social work or eco-social work, ecological issues. And I've certainly not seen any modules in which we address that at all actually, so I mean I can't absolutely categorically say that it's not addressed anywhere, but it's certainly not a major theme in any of our modules. And certainly not at first- and second-year level... In the limited number of hours that we actually have [the students] in class, then I think ... I just think that there are so many other issues that feel far more pressing and imminent. (Participant 5)

Finally, Participants 3 and 4 made interesting comments around who should bear some of the responsibility for driving the incorporation of ESW in the social work curriculum:

When you look at the umbrella of social development policy that we use in South Africa it does not seem as though they are putting more pressure on us to say we want students or graduates who are able to demonstrate environmental competence. Until this happens, we will not produce these graduates. We need to be given the standards and the outcomes and the indicators to do this. (Participant 3)

I think firstly, for the universities to get involved, there should be something from the top saying, look we need to start having a module on environmental issues. (Participant 4)

From the comments by social work educators, it appears that only two participating universities have introduced elements of ESW into their social work training. One participant does not foresee the incorporation of ESW into their training happening soon, and three see it as a potential opportunity to do so. From the findings it became clear that although participants agree that ESW is important and relevant, and that it should be included in social work training and practice, there seem to be two streams of thought. The one is to include ESW, but to do so on a postgraduate level. The other stream is that although ESW is important and relevant, there are just so many other issues that social workers must deal with that for now ESW might not be included in the training.

Whilst there is no doubt that ESW needs to be incorporated into social work syllabi, this is still slow in happening (Drolet, Wu, Taylor & Dennehy, 2015; Lombard, 2015; Phillip & Reisch, 2015). Dominelli (2012) emphasises that apart from including ESW in the social work curriculum, that social workers need a sophisticated array of knowledge and skills to 'effectively' deal with the current environmental crises (Phillip & Reisch, 2015).

DISCUSSION OF THE FINDINGS

This study is the first of its kind in South Africa and although small in sample size, contributes much needed information around how ESW is viewed within the context of social work practice in South Africa. For the first time, the views of social work academics were explored on the importance and relevance of ESW. Probably the most important aspect that was

highlighted in the findings is the fact that the inclusion of ESW in social work training and practice in South Africa will necessitate a paradigm shift in how social work training and practice are approached.

The findings indicated that all the participants acknowledge that the earth is under pressure, and that ESW *per se* is relevant and important to the profession. Participants also agree that ESW should be incorporated into the curriculum and general practice where possible. This viewpoint was specifically linked with the Agenda that was globally adopted by the social work profession and which included sustainability as one of its four pillars (IASSW, ICSW & IFSW, 2018). There were differing opinions, however, about the urgency of incorporating ESW, on how it should be done as far as introducing it into the syllabus is concerned, and how important it was for social work practice.

Participants seem to have come to realise that social workers already possess specific skills that could be useful in tackling environmental issues. For instance, participants refer to trauma counselling which is often experienced because of floods, runaway fires and even during drought seasons. In the participants' opinion, social workers' advocacy role and their role of creating awareness already form part of what would be expected when working from an ESW perspective. The participants therefore seem to acknowledge the fact that social workers already have a much bigger role to play in advocacy practice, challenging injustice and creating awareness around practising ESW. The findings suggest a need for an approach in ESW and social work practice where social workers can adapt their current skills to address environmental concepts when working with individuals and their communities. These findings are in tune with the overarching key attributes described by Ramsay and Boddy (2017:72) which involve "the creative application of social work skills to environmental concepts."

Participants seem to acknowledge that for social workers to practise ESW would involve working within an inter- and transdisciplinary approach when dealing with the impacts of climate change such as with droughts, scarcity of water and floods. Much has been written in the literature around ESW explaining the necessity of adopting both an inter- and transdisciplinary approach when implementing it in social work practice (Bellamy, Mullen, Satterfield, Newhouse, Ferguson, Brownson & Spring, 2013; Broersma, 2014). But writers seem not to be in agreement whether an inter- or transdisciplinary approach is needed when implementing ESW in social work. Norton (2009) spoke about the person-in-environment construct needing an interdisciplinary approach. Besthorn and Saleeby (2003) contended that these environmental models of the person in the environment overlooked a comprehensive understanding that an interdisciplinary approach would bring. Transdisciplinary ESW, as understood by the researchers, and which Dominelli (2018) has incorporated into her green social work approach, is an approach to social work that integrates the natural, social, health and other sciences, as well as indigenous knowledge. It is believed that by incorporating transdisciplinary knowledge, ESW will transcend each of social work's traditional and known boundaries.

Participants seem to already have some experiences of working with different departments. One participant had the experience of calling on the help of a specific government department while assisting a community that was impacted by severe floods. Other participants shared their

involvement with multidisciplinary teams, such as scientists, economists and sociologists. The question, however, remains what experience social workers have to unlock such collaboration possibilities.

Although there is an overall acknowledgement of the importance and relevance of incorporating ESW into social work training within a South African context, it might still be a long way before this will be realised, if the views of the participants are anything to go by. Reasons that are presented involve the fact that social workers in South Africa deal with a vast array of different issues which are all considered to be important. The undergraduate syllabuses as a result already cover a lot of work. To focus on environmental issues and climate change may therefore seem of lesser urgency.

What participants might not be considering, but what scientists are cautioning about, is the severity of the expected hazards that South Africa will have to deal with because of climate change (Bloom, 2020; Schenck, 2019). If one is to calculate these hazards on top of already overwhelming issues such as poverty, gender violence, hunger and a high unemployment rate, to name a few, then one can assume that the impact of climate change will be massively exacerbated. Therefore, not incorporating ESW into social work training would mean that these issues will just be harder to deal with in the future. For ESW to have its rightful place within social work training will necessitate a paradigm shift. The authors of this article consequently echo the call for change and the need for the decolonisation of social work, as well as educational and curriculum transformation in South Africa (Rasool & Harms-Smith, 2021). Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) suggest an approach of critical reflection, dialogue, analysis and the development of specific methodologies. By engaging with ESW in a self-reflective way, and through discussions and interactions with social work practitioners and educators, ESW could be a useful tool to incorporate new thinking, decolonisation, and indigenisation, which would hopefully help deal with the crisis that is already upon us.

As the decolonisation of social work becomes a priority in South Africa, one could reason that there are similarities in the aims of decolonisation theory and environmental theory. A need to practice resistance and undo and unlearn the epicolonial inheritance, and to engage in persistent positive action to build things up in a different way, seems to be something they both share (Kessi, Marks & Ramugondo, 2020). Rasool and Harms-Smith (2021) have started a process of including decoloniality into their syllabus at a South African university, using a critical participatory action research process. Perhaps a process such as this could be used to engage with ESW in South African universities.

IMPLICATIONS

The science is clear that South Africa is a hot spot for climate change. However, as is the case globally, social work in South Africa has not yet become involved as it probably should be in the discourse around climate change and its impact on people who are poor or who are marginalised. Climate change is thus a human rights issue, an important proof that ESW should be considered as a logical extension of social work's principles of social justice and human rights (Gilliomme & Lombard, 2020; Ramsey & Boddy, 2017).

The authors believe that South Africa mirrors social work practice and theory in the rest of the world, where there has been a long-drawn-out process to incorporate ESW concepts. ESW already seems to be incorporated more in practice as the impacts of climate change are being increasingly manifested, and slowly being incorporated into university curricula. Social work academics such as Androff, Fike and Rorke (2017), Bell (2019), Boddy, Macfarlane and Greenslade (2018), Boetto (2017), Drolet *et al.* (2015) and Papadopoulos (2019) have provided methods and inputs for incorporating ESW into social work curricula. It is, however, believed that if social work as a profession wants to be relevant in the fight against climate change, the bottom-up approach as suggested by this study should be followed. In a bottom-up approach overburdened communities, urban planners and public health professionals, amongst others, are given a voice in order to tap existing indigenous knowledge in how to deal with climate change and its consequences.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Because of the underlying concepts of a paradigm shift from modernity to sustainability, the very foundations of social work today are questioned. With human rights and environmental and social justice being part of our very professional core, social work however is exceptionally well placed to work with many other role players to make an important contribution to deal with the climate challenges. ESW can no longer be merely bolted onto a few courses here and there, and a global re-assessment of the role of social work in the 21st century is therefore required. This implies the need for deep reflection by social workers and policy makers on the future nature of the social work profession.

This study was only a start in exploring the views of educators on the importance and relevance of incorporating ESW in social work training and practice. Much more information, knowledge and environmental literacy are therefore needed, not only from educators but from practitioners alike. Exploring the impacts of climate change on social workers' clients, how they cope and deal with it, and what strategies they may use to cope could be fruitful areas for future research. Arkert and Jacobs (2021) are of the opinion that if drastic and urgent action is not taken on addressing the impact of climate change, also by the social work profession, calamitous and life-threatening impacts will result.

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