Striving to strengthen the ecosocial framework in social work in Finland

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Abstract There is no economic or social sustainability without ecological sustainability, yet the latter can hardly be achieved without the other forms of sustainability. While contemporary consumer societies are still today fundamentally unsustainable, advancing the overall sustainability transition as well as mitigating and preventing the ecological crisis should be high on the social work and community development agendas. On one hand, this is because the ecological crisis both causes and increases social inequality and vulnerability. On the other hand, aspiring sustainability requires profound social and cultural changes, bringing about which belongs to social work and community work's areas of expertise.

Asking how to respond to the socio-environmental crisis and its ramifications in social work education, this article focuses on the currently evolving ecosocial framework in Finnish social work education and practice, paying special attention to the opportunities and hindrances in its realization. The inquiry is based on thematic analysis of advanced level social work students' views on these issues, as presented on a 5 ECTS (credits as per the European Credit Transfer and Accumulation System) course Social Work in Ecosocial Transition, part of the University of Jyväskylä's social work master's degree curriculum. In countries like Finland, where community development has a marginal role, adoption of the ecosocial framework would inherently strengthen the community based and political orientation in social work.

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Introduction

While ecological sustainability is the prerequisite for the other forms of sustainability – economic, social and cultural – in the present world it can hardly be achieved without profoundly sustainable economic and societal practices. With mounting evidence, there is high scientific unanimity that the ongoing processes of wide-ranging and often irreplaceable environmental decay, such as biodiversity loss, climate disruption and deterioration of ecosystems, jeopardize Earth's ability to sustain complex life (Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021, p. 1). Widespread awareness of this notwithstanding, contemporary consumer societies remain stuck on 'sustained politics of unsustainability' (Blühdorn, 2014).

As humanity's massive and expanding material cum ecological imprint threatens to exceed the carrying capacity of the planet Earth, the situation calls for a fundamental and rapid change of course. Nevertheless, liberal democracies, as also societies globally, have been notably incapable of executing the radical structural changes required, for that would be politically inopportune and provoke a backlash in the short term (Blühdorn, 2014; Bradshaw *et al.*, 2021, p. 5). Abundant sustainability talks notwithstanding, dominant socio-economic paradigms continue prioritizing economy over the environment (Bradshaw *et al.*, p. 5). The reasons for the previously described dissonance are manifold and complex, implying a broader systemic (Wallerstein *et al.*, 2014) or civilizational (Ahmed, 2010) crisis.

The crises increase polarization within and between societies and make people harbour concerns about the impacts of the forthcoming transformations on their own lives and lifestyles, which then fuels both new conflicts over social opportunities, and campaigns for post-growth society. In the view of Blühdorn and Deflorian (2021, pp. 1–2) the polarization encapsulates as two major forms of positioning, (i) new social movements and activisms, such as Occupy Wall Street or Fridays For Future and (ii) right-wing anti-environmentalist, anti-liberal and anti-globalization populist mobilization. While the former has pushed forward egalitarian, participatory and environmental agendas, the latter has fundamentally reconfigured public political space in many countries (Blühdorn and Deflorian 2021, p. 13).

Social work, which stands for an umbrella term for the profession, related service system, discipline and social movement to protect the poor and the vulnerable and to advance social justice, is not detached from the previously described developments and paradoxes. Rather, as an academic field and a profession the globally hegemonic western social work stems from the same anthropocentric worldview of western modernity that has caused the environmental crises at stake (Bell, 2021, pp. 58–59). Accordingly, mainstream social work has largely separated 'nature' from 'humanity',

understanding the environment as social, physical and cultural, not as the natural environment (Besthorn, 2012). The ecological crises reveal this kind of axiomatic anthropocentrism as problematic (Bell, 2021). While community development in general has been more attentive to the natural environment due to its holistic orientation and community-based circumstances of work (Rinkel and Powers, 2017), both social work and community development have a social justice-based ethical obligation to do everything in their power to mitigate and foster adaptation to climate and ecological crises.

Our article approaches these issues in the context of Finland, where social work is largely understood as part of the welfare state machinery and does not quite recognize community development as its duty. Therefore, community development is nearly non-existent and not an integral part of existing social work practices. Acknowledging the need to rethink existing practices and organization of work, our starting point is that social work and also community development must do its own part to further the overarching sustainability transition inevitably on the way. While some research has been done on the relationship between social work and the environment in social work education (e.g. Crawford *et al.*, 2015; Jones, 2010), this article analyses the views of social work students on factors that either prevent or promote the adoption of ecosocial work. We further ask how to make way for the ecosocial framework in social work, and how social work education can equip social workers to respond to environmental crises, also in collaboration with various communities.

The article continues with a brief summary of ecosocial work, as well as social work and community work in Finland. Thereafter, it discusses the data and methods utilized, introduces the course Social Work in Ecosocial Transition and presents the hindering and enabling factors for the adoption of the ecosocial framework, as discussed during the course. The article concludes with discussion on these findings and their implications.

Ecosocial work

Ecosocial work (overlapping with ecological/environmental/green social work) is about realigning social work scholarship and practice on the basis that human beings are part of nature (Närhi and Matthies, 2016, 2018; Boetto 2017; Coates and Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2012). The starting point for these arguments is that humanity is dependent on the delicate balance of the ecosystems and the climatic system of the Earth. The ecological crisis implies that human well-being, and moreover, the well-being and existence of non-human animals and other species, is at risk. The ecological crisis thus implicates that social work has, for its part, failed in its task of

protecting the most vulnerable people (Dominelli, 2012) and the foundations of life. Ecosocial work strives to bring about an ecosocial paradigm change in social work. Instead of a mere sustainability turn, this requires a deeper renewal of social work practice and scholarship. Social work that delineates ecological issues as outside its area of expertise and ignores the connections between the deterioration of the natural environment and other inequality inflicting and maintaining mechanisms lacks analytic edge (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2016, p. 288).

As the above indicates, the ecosocial framework shares much in common with the critical, structural, indigenous and feminist approaches in the field of social work. All of them reflect a broad understanding of the person-in-environment and interest in the dynamics of power (Närhi and Matthies, 2016; Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Gray *et al.*, 2012.) Although early pioneers of western social work like Jane Addams recognized the importance of the physical and natural environment (e.g. Närhi and Matthies, 2016), in western societies awakening to its importance was influenced by the emergence of environmental movements during the latter half of the 20th century. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the conceptual knowledge formation of ecosocial, ecological, green or environmental social work has become the subject of academic social work research. Although the theoretical literature of ecosocial work has increased notably since then, ecosocial practice has received greater attention only from the 2010s onwards (Närhi and Matthies, 2001, 2016; Boetto *et al.*, 2020).

In practice, ecosocial work is a highly holistic as well as inherently community-based framework consisting of a wide spectrum of practices from utilizing nature-assisted methods to organizing systemic change in various levels (Närhi and Matthies, 2018; Boetto *et al.* 2020). Boetto (2017) proposes five levels of ecosocial work practice in her transformative ecosocial model. The first is the personal level, which encompasses the personal growth of the social worker and his/her perceived connection to the natural environment, encompassing the actions one takes in one's own life in the face of ecosocial change. The individual level covers micro level social work with individuals and can be accomplished, for example, by redefining with the client the elements that are important for his/her well-being and quality of life. At the group level, change is promoted through different groups, by setting up or joining an existing group of social work clients and/or practitioners who share the same values and activities. The next level is the community level implying, for example, the promotion of community needs and sustainable development together with residents and organizations. The broadest level is the structural level at which economic and political change is required. By understanding the interdependencies between different levels, a social worker, and also a community worker, can establish

and join work practices that contribute to changing the profession and the society at large (Boetto, 2017, pp. 61–62; Boetto *et al.*, 2020).

The ecosocial framework produces new types of practices, thereby promoting the renewal of social work. Particularly in the global north, where the community-based approaches have been at the margins of more bureaucratic work focusing on individuals, there seems to be rising interest to shift the emphasis of social work towards more community-based and action-oriented modes of work (Närhi and Matthies, 2018; Närhi *et al.*, 2021). Moreover, prioritizing a holistic understanding of sustainability in social work can redirect the attention from individuals to the causes of the social problems and encourage structural social work to change them (Närhi and Matthies, 2018).

Social work, community work and social work education in Finland

The Finnish social welfare system is characterized by extensive public-funded responsibility. At the minimum, the social protection system aims to guarantee everyone indispensable subsistence and care, the goal being to ensure equality, enable participation and generally secure the care and support that citizens need during their life course (Social Welfare in Finland, 2006). A fairly clear consensus exists that social work should be carried out at the individual and community level, while also aiming to change socially unequal structures (e.g. Turunen, 2004; Roivainen, 2010; Pohjola, 2011). In practice, however, the focus is mainly on integrating individuals into the existing structures of society (Pohjola, 2011).

In Finland as in other Nordic countries, community work has been largely understood as municipal work aimed specifically at local communities. Spreading to Finland from other Nordic countries in the 1960s and 1970s, the dominant orientation in Finnish community work has been administrative, meaning authority-driven top-down activities in residential areas. In other words, community development, in the sense understood in many anglophone countries, does not exist in Finland, nor is community development taught as part of the social work curriculum. Instead of designated community workers, community work or community-based social work is done by social workers or other social professionals as part of municipal social work, meaning mostly social work conducted in neighbourhoods. Typical forms of work include running various 'low threshold' meetings and places of support or facilitating neighbourhood-based collaborative problem solving and development work. Since the beginning of the 21st century, along with the doctrine of the new public management, even this kind of community social work has become more focused on individuals, such as social work

clients and members of potential risk groups. Overall, both community work and structural social work have been at the margins of Finnish social work due to the established role of social workers as civil servants of local municipalities (Roivainen, 2010)

Finnish social workers are primarily employed in the local level public services. The right to practice social work is granted upon application to the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira). Social work education is provided in six universities (Helsinki, Eastern Finland, Jyväskylä, Lapland, Tampere, Turku). The bachelor and master's level social work studies aim to equip the graduates with generalist skills (Lähteinen *et al.*, 2017). The goal is to provide future social workers with necessary knowledge to carry out social work in diverse settings, such as local social service and family counselling centres, institutions for elderly people or children, schools, social and health care organizations including community organizations, units dealing with substance misuse and addiction or institutions working with crime. Although no one can master the entire field of social work, education strives to provide a foundation on which to build professionalism and know-how on-the-job. Those who desire to advance their competences further can continue to specialization programmes or doctoral studies.

Thematic analysis of social work students' views on ecosocial work

The aim of this article is to understand how social work education could equip social workers to integrate the ecosocial framework into their work. In doing so, it relies heavily on student inputs on a 5 ECTS course Social Work in Ecosocial Transition, which is an introductory module of ecosocial work that is part of the University of Jyväskylä's (hereafter JYU) social work master's degree curriculum 2020–2023. The course is the first of its kind in Finnish social work degree programmes, planned and in part taught by the authors. Our decision to rely on student perceptions on ecosocial work draws from the fact that ecosocial work is not yet widely known among social workers in Finland. At the same time, despite a few studies (Boetto *et al.*, 2020; Boetto et al., 2021; Närhi *et al.*, 2021; Nöjd 2020), relatively little is known about Finnish social workers' attitudes towards the natural environment and ecosocial work practice. Therefore, we considered that social work master students learning about ecosocial work are more likely able to take informed stands on the issue.

A total of 78 students signed up for the course Social Work in Ecosocial Transition during the academic year 2020–2021, and 56 completed it. Before starting the course, 49 students responded to a short survey that mapped their personal relationship with the natural environment and ecological

sustainability, as well as their views on whether and how ecological sustainability was considered in the social work workplaces with which they were familiar. This survey was conducted anonymously and responding was voluntary. On the basis of the answers, the respondents were from age groups between 20 and 64 and nearly all of them were women. More than 60 percent of the respondents had already some (from a few months to several years) experience of social work practice. Their experience was most commonly from child and family services, and second most commonly from adult social work, which in Finland covers a wide range of mostly case work type of practices with adult (18 years or older) service users. In addition, a few respondents had worked in health social work, disability services or immigration services.

The students were informed at the start of the module about our interest to use their anonymized course inputs for research purposes. At the end of the course, as part of a feedback survey, each student was asked either to give or deny permission to use her/his course inputs as research data. The request emphasized that the answer would have no impact on the evaluation of the course grades and that giving consent was voluntary. This paper only utilizes entries (from 52 students) for which the permission was granted. We did not obtain university ethical approval for the research, because in Finland ethical approval is only required for research involving children or vulnerable people.

Regarding student inputs on the course, we focus particularly on two discussion groups at the end of the course, namely 'What kind of new opportunities does the ecosocial approach provide in and for social work?' and 'Why and how is perceiving ecosocial principles difficult in social work?', of which the students could choose to contribute to one or both. We analysed the content of these discussions with a thematic analysis method (e.g. Braun and Clarke, 2006), starting from identifying the key and interesting expressions and themes in the entries. Thereafter, we organized these expressions under broader thematic entities and eventually into main and subcategories. In practice, we first read the discussion entries several times, coded them in a data-driven manner, and on this basis reorganized our findings thematically for closer examination and further categorizing. While the eventual categorization took some thinking over, we were able to organize the data into a coherent whole when focusing on the factors that either hinder or enable the adoption of the ecosocial framework, as discussed in detail later.

The JYU course social work in ecosocial transition

The course on ecosocial work was realized as an English language online course available to social work master degree students both in the JYU and,

acknowledging the nationwide need for the subject matter, to a maximum of twenty students per year from other Finnish universities via the Finnish National University Network for Social Work. As the learning objectives posit, after the course the students should understand the connectedness of sustainable development and environmental and economic issues in social work and the importance of ecological sustainability for trans- and intergenerational responsibility and risk-carrying capacity in social work. Moreover, they should understand the importance of ecosocial transition in and for social work, including the responsibilities and opportunities it poses and be aware of different possibilities to implement ecosocial work in practice.

In the first iteration, taught in January–March 2021, the course content was divided into three modules: (i) introduction, (ii) the ecosocial transition and social work as part of it and (iii) implementing ecosocial work. Of these, the introduction focused on the key concepts and the historical development of ecosocial approach. The second module discussed how social work and the ecosocial/sustainability transition intertwine. The third module provided examples and insights about concrete applications of ecosocial work, as well as of their challenges, in different parts of the world. Besides a few opportunities for concurrent online chats, the course proceeded with independent study.

Each module consisted of pre-recorded lectures and readings from the course's two textbooks, Matthies and Närhi (2017) and McKinnon and Alston (2016). The lectures, altogether 13, lasted 15–40 minutes each, and besides JYU staff, a couple of them were delivered by overseas colleagues working on ecosocial issues. The student assignments included introducing oneself and contributing to discussions on specific topics, such as ecosocial work as a place-based and global project; the connections between sustainable development and social work and rethinking economy in social work practice (altogether five discussion groups requiring a set minimum of entries). In addition, the final and major assignment was to write either a six- to eight-page essay on the role of social work in the ecosocial transition or formulate a realizable plan of an ecosocial project or practice application. Lastly, the students were asked to give feedback on the course through an online form. While the teaching and discussions were in English, there was an option to write the essay/project plan in Finnish, which many of the students utilized.

Based on the student feedback, as well as their different assignments, the course achieved its targets. After initial difficulty, reported by many, to settle down to ponder the connections between ecology and social work, the course clearly enabled the students to see that the natural environment matters for social work and vice versa. While many reported this as truly

illuminating, they were also attentive and realistic about the obstacles that hamper widespread deployment of the ecosocial framework in Finnish social work. The students precisely discussed both the new opportunities that the ecosocial framework provides for social work as well as the difficulties in its perception and adoption.

Results: hindering and enabling factors for the adoption of the ecosocial framework

We organized the themes from the student's discussion entries under five main categories on the basis of whether they were related to (i) the doctrine of social work, or if they were (ii) service user, (iii) practitioner, or (iv) organization related or (v) connected with broader societal structures.

The doctrine of social work reflects the prevailing understanding of social work in society, including social work's role, key tasks and modes of working. The doctrine thus represents the students' understanding of mainstream social work in Finland, which they understood as human centred and defined by the existing service structure, national legislation and accustomed ways of working. While the human-centred understanding of social work hinders the adoption of ecosocial work, it is dominant in teaching and research at educational institutions. Against this background, the students found grasping the ecosocial framework difficult. However, once the ecosocial framework is internalized, it provides a useful framework to rethink social work theory and practice. As one student claimed, ecosocial practice should be a matter of course in everyday social work. As enablers of ecosocial practices, the students emphasized the need to interpret broadly the core contents of social work's mission, such as the commitment to social justice, collective responsibility and safeguarding those in a vulnerable position. Further, to truly engage with ecosocial work, a broader understanding of social work that acknowledges the connectedness of local and global processes, intergenerational perspectives and the need to expand social work's human–nature relations beyond anthropocentrism would be needed. Social work education should support the ecosocial project by providing the knowledge base required.

The second category, **service user-related factors**, divides into the subcategories of service users' *attitudes and motivation* and the *justice* of applying the ecosocial framework on them. The students pointed out that some service users do not believe in climate change and that for those who do, environmental issues are often secondary to making ends meet, which may transfer into lack of motivation to consider ecological issues. Then again, not all service users are the same; one can start ecosocial work with those who are interested to do so. Even then, the question raised was the justice

of focusing on ecological issues with service users, who due to their limited financial resources usually have moderate ecological footprint to start with. From an ecological point of view the overconsuming and affluent would indeed be a more apt target group to reconsider consumption. On the other hand, ecosocial work is about organizing possibilities for meaningful and sustainable everyday life for everyone, also for the poor and marginalized, and ensuring that the sustainability transition is fair. It is therefore important that the transition measures acknowledge structural inequality in societies, and that also marginalized people have a say in social and environmental decision making.

In our analysis of the student writings, the third, **practitioner-related** category includes five subcategories, which can either hinder or enable engagement with the ecosocial framework depending on the practitioner's stand. First, the practitioner's personal *relationship to nature* is significant; for a sense of connectedness is known to have a positive impact on the personal willingness and creativity to apply nature-assisted methods and the ecosocial framework (Boetto, 2017; Boetto, *et al.* 2020; McKinnon, 2013). Secondly, the students considered the practitioner's *knowledge on environmental issues*, and thirdly, *attitudes and values* important for his/her stance on ecosocial work. While ecosocial work is a way to increase everyday environmental awareness, the practitioners' personal commitment to ecological values and lifestyle provides motivation for the work, unlike, for example, climate change denialism. Related to these, the fourth subcategory, the practitioner's *orientation to change*, and fifth, the overall *perception of ecosocial work*, impacts the willingness of a single practitioner to embrace the ecosocial framework. The orientation to change is crucial, for ecosocial work is about changing the society.

In our analysis, the fourth category, **factors related to social work organizations**, is the largest, consisting of ten subcategories. While the ecosocial framework can in principle be adopted by any organization, the organizational factors connect closely with the doctrine of social work discussed under category one, illuminating how the doctrine is put into practice at the level of actual social work organizations. In the student writings, the key to organizational neglect or approval of ecosocial work, and thus the first subcategory, was the *understanding of the basic function of the organization*, and thereby the organization's mission and tasks. The students considered the ecosocial framework harder to instil in organizations or units with a rather restricted view of social work. Moreover, such organizations may define the *job description*s (subcategory 2) of their personnel in a restrictive, rather than flexible manner. In order to cope with their workload, for example, municipal social welfare offices that focus mostly on child protection and adult social work may limit their duties primarily to statutory tasks and the

needs of the present moment. In such cases, engagement with ecosocial work is easily seen as something extra beyond the organization's resources and tasks, even if it would contribute to them. On the other hand, organizations with a more holistic approach to social work are often more open to ecosocial practices.

The way the organization understands its basic function further defines the organization's stances on numerous other issues, such as the organization's *relationship to existing structures, established practices, structural (political) social work* and *how efficiency is understood* in the organization (subcategories 3–6). The impression of the students was that organizations that strongly adhere to their established practices and public authority duties are not likely to embrace radical perspectives like ecosocial work; they rather solidify the existing status quo. On the other hand, organizations with a more change-oriented mission can easily utilize the ecosocial framework.

Other subcategories related to social work organizations included *management*, *financial and other resources*, *understanding of well-being* and *the place and nature of work* (subcategories 7–10). In organizations with a restricted, rather than holistic, vision of social work, attempts to introduce ecosocial work often lack the support of management, which would be needed for the broader endorsement of ecosocial work. A narrower view of social work is often justified with a lack of resources. However, it may at times lead to short-sighted saving of resources, such as not promoting community cohesion and minding about the natural environment, whereas a more holistic view could better contribute to both sustainability and well-being in the long term. In fact, many practices at the heart of the ecosocial framework, such as consistently utilizing the natural environment in the work, are feasible with no or low cost. After all, the organization's understanding of its function reflects the understanding of well-being prevalent in the organization, as well as the place and nature of the work conducted. Ecosocial principles are harder to apply if promoting well-being is understood primarily as providing the needed material resources (only), and the work is mostly office-based administrative work with individuals, instead of a more holistic approach.

Of the themes addressed in the student discussions, the fifth and final category of **societal factors** covers five subcategories either hindering or enabling the adoption of ecosocial work. As the main source of the environmental problems at stake today, the first and most extensively discussed of these was *the capitalist economy* and its imperative of continuous economic growth. On one hand, the students acknowledged the necessity to shift the societal priorities from economic to environmental; on the other hand, they considered this as an inconsistent and fragile project. This is because in Finland social work, being largely tax-funded public activity, is highly

dependent on the capitalist economy. The students reckoned that although ecosocial work can locally build anti- or less capitalist alternatives, capitalism at large is not transformed via such projects. Meanwhile, investing in community building and general coziness, such as public gardens or meeting places, may be beyond social or community work's finances. Moreover, voices and initiatives criticizing the capitalist economy may be blocked by those in power. For example, already existing anti-capitalist alternatives, such as choosing a low-consuming lifestyle in a self-sufficiency aspiring eco-community, may be interpreted just as a marginal, even freakish, lifestyle of the poor, instead of acknowledged as a deliberate political act. In our sample, social work students thus appear rather pessimistic regarding the possibilities to transform ecologically harmful economic practices. At the same time, community development's take on these issues is far more optimistic, including active collaboration with various new economy, post-growth and post-capitalist movements (Rinkel and Powers, 2017).

The other societal themes that the students regarded either hindering or enabling the adoption of the ecosocial framework include *legislation*, factors related to *western modernity, individualism* and *the complexity of the ecological crisis.* While posing social workers many other obligations, Finnish legislation does not yet oblige them to follow ecological or sustainability principles. At the same time, in line with the general anthropocentrism of western worldviews, many social workers and service users consider their personal well-being distinct from the natural environment and experience modern life as liberating, which reduces the appeal of visions critical of modernity. While the antidote for this would be absorbing that humans, together with other species, are part of nature and dependent on each other, a central feature of modernity is individualism. Community-based sustainable practices being at the heart of ecosocial work, the students saw that current social work practices often fail to recognize the potential of communities. Nonetheless, activities such as community gardening, recycling, upcycling and repairing together, which some social workers already promote, both build community cohesion and reduce people's carbon footprints and consumption, while spreading these important skills. Moreover, they help people relax and connect with nature and each other and bond people from different generations and groups together. All said, although the ecological crisis is a complex phenomenon, understanding it is necessary and needs to inform social work, and community development, theory and practice.

High time, and need of support, for community-based and structural ecosocial work

As the previous analysis is based on students' discussion entries in a course planned by us, it could be claimed that the data we got back as teachers is

largely what we provided for the students. While the way we had formulated the course to some extent influenced the tone and issues discussed, being thus a limitation of our data and analysis, the students also surprised us in many ways. What is more, their views on the factors contributing to or hindering the adoption of the ecosocial framework are highly similar to recent research findings. Both Boetto *et al.* (2020, 2021), reporting the views of Australian and Finnish social workers on the boundary conditions of ecosocial work, and Närhi *et al.* (2021), researching the views of Finnish social workers on ecosocial work, found similar factors to be critical for the implementation of ecosocial work in practice. As in our analysis, also in these studies the hindering and enabling factors were often different aspects of the same factor. For example, organizational and managerial factors were seen as either contributing or hindering ecosocial work on the basis of whether the organization and managers understood, or not, the links between ecological and social sustainability and thus the possibilities of ecosocial work for practice.

Further, Boetto *et al.* (2020) found that social workers experienced smaller organizations as more conducive to being flexible, possibly because small teams facilitate communication and encourage close and positive relationships among the workers. In fact, like-minded colleagues, as well as finding a common tone with management, were crucial to the adoption of ecosocial work by both Boetto *et al.* (2020); Närhi *et al.* (2021) and the student responses. One option for peer support and sharing ideas discussed in the student entries was establishing a national (online) network for those keen to do ecosocial work. Meanwhile, noting the pressing nature of the ecological crisis, an idea presented to the authors at a Finnish social work research conference was that besides social work students, there should also be training on ecosocial work available for seasoned social workers. At various fronts, there seems to be a need to establish communities of practice around ecosocial work and its practical applications.

Yet, reflecting the complexity of the ecological crisis, aspects of the student data illuminate a sense of powerlessness in relation to prevailing societal and economic structures, to which also social work is attached, and influencing that is beyond the capacity of an individual social worker. Moreover, some students expressed critical awareness of their own complicity, as members of affluent society, in exploitative and unsustainable relationships with nature (see for example Brand and Wissen, 2018). The force of inertia of the existing structures notwithstanding, most of the students were at least cautiously optimistic about their scope to introduce ecosocial practices in their organizations 'via small steps', such as starting to meet their clients outdoors when possible. Overall, the understanding was that persistent, even small steps towards more sustainable and nature-based practices can

gradually have far-reaching implications across social work organizations. Moreover, while it is important to recognize how we are embedded in the destructive structures we are trying to oppose, such as the overconsumption of natural resources, it is equally important to move beyond the feelings of guilt and complicity. As Haraway (2016, p. 4) notes, in current times neither overt hope nor despair help us forward. Rather, we must figure out how to maintain our response-ability, in essence praxis of care, on the wounded planet (Haraway, 2020, p. 105).

For the time being, to a much greater extent than we were able to expect beforehand, the students particularly problematized the prevailing bureaucratic and office-centred way of working and generally narrow content of social work practice. Correspondingly, many of the discussion group entries are clear-cut calls for investment and opportunities to do both community-based and structural social work to a far greater extent than current organizational structures and job descriptions allow. In their project plans, the students envisioned, for example, various ways to utilize food waste so that it generates both employment and serves the local community; organizing short-term summer jobs for migrant youth as gardeners and caretakers at a residential area in order to contribute to both their income needs, belonging to the area, and pleasantness of the place; informing migrant women about local sustainability practices and familiarizing them with the surrounding natural environment; and planning desired ecosocial activities together with children and youth living at the area.

In general, the ecosocial framework clearly evoked a desire to invent community work anew so that it better acknowledges the importance of the natural environment and enhances sustainability, while also utilizing the possibilities that local natural environments provide for the work. However, while the ecosocial framework opens new horizons for sustainability and well-being-enhancing community-based work, it needs to be introduced skillfully. Connected to increased polarization within societies in general, there is a dividing line between those with environmental and those with anti-environmental orientations. Transcending this is a genuine challenge for community development and ecosocial work. In the future, this is one of the issues we would like to address more thoroughly in our teaching.

Conclusions

Social work education strives to influence and enhance students' understanding, knowledge and skills of social work, including the doctrine and value base of social work, knowledge on specific fields and practical skills. Moreover, university education prepares the students in critical thinking and reflection, including abilities to seek, evaluate and produce scientific knowledge. The ecosocial paradigm challenges current and future social

work practitioners to change their thinking and actions towards a more change-seeking and sustainability-enhancing direction. Interestingly, in the Finnish context at least, the ecosocial framework can also provide social work with a gateway to move closer to community development, including learning from its theoretical and methodical approaches.

Analysing the views of Finnish social work students, who have familiarized themselves with ecosocial work and who have already some contact with social work practice, our concern in this article has been how to make way for the adoption of the ecosocial framework in social work. As previously discussed, we identified five categories of factors that either hinder or enable ecosocial work based on their relationship to the doctrine of social work, service users, social work practitioners, social work organizations, or the society at large. When looking at the role of education in the adoption of the ecosocial framework, it is worth focusing on those factors that education can realistically have an impact on. In our opinion, based on data from one course, education can have an impact particularly on the practitioners' understanding (doctrine) of social work. We claim that it is possible to promote change indirectly in certain other factors as well, particularly at the level of social work organizations. For the time being, bridging the gap between mainstream social work and the ecosocial perspective is often challenging to social workers.

Education can address the lack of knowledge and thereby contribute to the broader mission of social work on the importance of ecosocial work for the sustainable well-being of clients and communities. In order to attune both social work doctrine and its practitioners to an ecosocial mode, it is vitally important to acknowledge the ecological crises in social work education and equip future social workers with the understanding that social work can play its part in tackling and alleviating them, precisely with its expertise on the social. At the same time, critical reflection on 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). Accordingly, social work and community development education need to convey knowledge of what ecosocial work means in practice, from community garden and community kitchen-type activities that combine both ecological and social sustainability to structural social work. This is largely also the message of the students who attended the Social Work in Ecosocial Transition course.

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Acknowledgements

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