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Social welfare professionals' views on addressing environmental issues in social work in Finland

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ABSTRACT

Global environmental challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, and overconsumption of natural resources require urgent action. Environmental crises have social consequences; hence, social work should participate in recognizing and mitigating these . This study investigated social welfare professionals' perceptions on the relation of their work to environmental issues in Finland and the factors that influence these views. The research questions were: 1) How important do social welfare professionals perceive addressing environmental issues to be in their work? 2) What kinds of environmental issues do they perceive as having the most influence on social work clients' wellbeing in Finland? 3) What background factors are associated with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work? A survey ($N = 542$) conducted among Finnish social welfare professionals in November 2020 showed that most respondents perceived addressing environmental issues in social work as important. Increasing concentrations of the population in certain areas, anxiety related to environmental problems, and desolated rural areas were the three most important environment-related issues marked as impairing client wellbeing. Social welfare professionals who emphasized the importance of addressing environmental issues in their personal life and those working in private or third sector organizations were more likely than public sector counterparts to value addressing environmental issues in social work. The findings suggest that social welfare professionals recognize that environment-related issues affect client wellbeing; hence, these issues should be incorporated into social work training and practice.

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Ecosocial work; environment; social work; social welfare

Introduction

Environmental challenges, such as biodiversity loss, the impacts of climate change, and overconsumption of natural resources require urgent action (European Environment Agency 2020). Environmental crises have social impacts, and social work should participate in solving such crises and mitigating their consequences (Matthies 2017, 28). The consequences of environmental degradation particularly affect those already in a marginalized position, which in turn renders this a justice issue (Dominelli 2013, 424–436). Here, the environment refers to the natural world and physical surroundings (Oxford English Dictionary 2022). This study recognizes the interconnected relationship between humans and the environment, and people as dependent on the resources the natural environment provides (Besthorn 2011; Haila and Dyke 2006). In this article,

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environmental issues cover a wide range of phenomena from climate change and pollution to loss of green space. While some of the phenomena considered in this study, such as population concentration in certain areas, are not necessarily caused by changes in the natural environment, they affect people's physical living environments. An ecosocial approach in social work calls for integrating the natural environment into social work, raising awareness of the risks and injustices caused by environmental problems, and contributing to the urgently needed transition towards a more sustainable society (e.g. Boetto 2017; Nikku, Ku, and Dominelli 2018; Matthies and Närhi 2017).

It is increasingly acknowledged that social work practitioners are responding to the impacts of, e.g. climate change (Boetto et al. 2020, 300). It is important to understand social work practitioners' perspectives in order to support them in responding to the challenges presented by environmental changes such as climate change (Allen 2020). This study investigated social welfare professionals' perceptions on the relation of their work to environmental issues in Finland, and factors which influence these views. Bearing in mind that the previous findings are from research in different social work contexts and settings, the data enable testing of the implications of previous research findings: 1) social welfare professionals consider environmental issues important in social work (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001) and 2) personal interest in the wellbeing of the natural environment is associated with recognizing the importance of the environment and environmental issues in the social work context (Boetto 2017; McKinnon 2013). This study also explores what other background factors are linked with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work, and what kinds of environmental issues most influence the wellbeing of social work clients.

The study context

In this study, social work refers to a variety of social welfare-related work conducted by professionals from differing educational backgrounds (e.g. Lyons et al. 2012, 2; see also Rapeli 2017, 27), most often a bachelor's degree in social services, rehabilitation or gerontology or a master's degree in social work. To work as a licenced social worker in Finland, a master's degree in social work from a university and a licence from the National Supervisory Authority for Welfare and Health (Valvira) are needed. Working as a licenced social services professional requires a bachelor's degree in social services, rehabilitation, or gerontology from a university of applied sciences and a licence from Valvira. Both degrees take a general approach in providing the tools needed to work in different social welfare fields (Lähteinen et al. 2017), and both draw from social work theory. Licenced social workers most often work as social workers in social welfare or health care, or, e.g. as managers in social welfare organizations. Licenced social services professionals often work as instructors or counsellors, providing guidance and assisting individuals and families in accessing the service system and in their everyday lives (Talentia 2022.). While both professional roles include supporting clients, licenced social workers are also more often involved in administrative decision-making. In Finland, social work has traditionally mostly been public-sector driven and aimed at helping individuals and families.

Finland is a relatively wealthy, sparsely populated Nordic country with plenty of open spaces and nature for people to enjoy. In the Finnish social and health care context, the natural environment has been recognized as a source of wellbeing (Soini et al. 2011). The possible threat to wellbeing caused by environmental issues has gained less attention, although the role of social work in heatwaves, addressed from a crisis management perspective, has been studied recently (Rapeli 2017; Rapeli and Mussalo-Rauhamaa 2022).

Environmental issues as a social work interest

This research focuses on ecosocial approach in social work. An ecosocial approach recognizes the reciprocal effects of humans and the environment and investigates the connections between social

and environmental problems (Matthies, Närhi, and Ward 2001). In the late 1980s and 1990s consideration of the natural environment in social work was prompted by environmental justice movements and concerns about environmental degradation due to waste, pollution, and unsustainable agricultural practices, and the injustices these imposed on certain groups of people (Gray, Coates, and Hetherington 2013, 11). The relationship between social work and the environment is manifested in many conceptual frameworks other than the ecosocial, such as green social work (Dominelli 2018), environmental social work (Gray, Coates, and Hetherington 2013; Ramsay and Boddy 2017) and ecological social work (Besthorn 2015; McKinnon and Alston 2016). The overarching themes include incorporating the natural environment in social work values and practice, applying social work skills to environmental issues, and promoting societal change towards sustainability (Ramsay and Boddy 2017). In the Finnish social work context, the concept 'ecosocial' has previously been used (e.g. Matthies and Närhi 2001, 2017).

The consequences of environmental issues impair wellbeing, especially among people already in a marginalized position (Dominelli 2013, 434–436), including those in the wealthier European countries (Nesmith and Smyth 2015, 486). In Finland, for example, the health effects of heatwaves are particularly felt by older people and those with long-term illnesses (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2022). Those in a physically, socially or economically more challenging position have less resources to prepare for exceptional conditions, such as power outages, heatwaves, or general economic insecurity (Mayer et al. 2020, 37). Therefore, environmental issues, including not only climate change but also environmental degradation and biodiversity issues, are social justice issues and hence relevant to social work.

The consequences of climate change also affect Finns. Recognized health effects of climate change include health hazards caused by heatwaves, outbreaks of water-borne diseases, vector-borne infectious diseases, accidents due to slippery winter conditions, sick building syndrome, and a growing risk of succumbing to seasonal affective disorder (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2022; Tuomenvirta et al. 2018). Thus far, the social consequences of climate change have not been widely recognized in Finland, although possible effects on, e.g. migration, income, and food security have been discussed (e.g. Mayer et al. 2020). Moreover, climate change impacts in other regions of the world may affect Finland's socio-economic situation via economic worsening or the arrival of ecological refugees (Tuomenvirta et al. 2018). In Finland, the role of social welfare in adapting to climate change is to provide the social services needed by those with insufficient resources to adapt to changes brought about by climate change, and to provide knowledge on local conditions and the needs of people in the most vulnerable position. Such knowledge enables assessment of the social impacts of climate change adaptation, prediction of possible problems, and strengthening of local resilience (Meriläinen et al. 2021, 33.).

Boetto (2017) has constructed a transformative ecosocial model for practice emphasizing a consistent ontological, epistemological and methodological base in social work. The model has three dimensions, each constituting a prerequisite for an ecosocial orientation. The first dimension ('being') refers to the identities, beliefs, and attitudes of social work practitioners: how each understands the value of nature and the strength of their emotional and practical connection to it. The second dimension ('thinking') refers to personal and professional knowledge and values. The third dimension ('doing') refers to social work practices. The model provides a theoretical framework for examining the social work relationship with the natural environment.

Previous research on social work practitioners' views on environmental issues

Only a few survey studies exist on social work practitioners' views on environmental issues (Aalto 2022, 22; Hostert 2020, 28–29). Besides its scarcity, the previous research has focused on a diversity of social work contexts and research settings, and explored social workers' views on, e.g. ecosocial approach and environmental justice rather than environmental issues as such.

Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001, $N = 113$) surveyed social work practitioners' perceptions of the importance of environmental issues in social work in the US and South Africa. 71% claimed that environmental issues were important to the social work profession, while only 43% reported that environmental issues were important in their personal practice (Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001). Shaw (2011, $N = 373$) found that social workers in the US were no more nor less environmentally friendly than the general population. Nevertheless, 90% agreed that issues related to social work and the natural environment should be discussed in social work education (Shaw 2011, 15). Nesmith and Smyth (2015, 485, 491–492) found in their survey among U.S. social workers ($N = 373$) that they tended to view environmental justice issues as important to the profession and reported that clients were exposed to environmental hazards such as food deserts, unsafe play spaces, lead poisoning, extreme weather, and air pollution. Jung (2016, $N = 112$), who, studied U.S. social work students' attitudes towards the natural environment, found that 96% agreed that environmental issues affect the populations that social workers serve, and 91% disagreed that social workers do not need to know about environmental issues. Hostert (2020, $N = 146$) surveyed social work students and practitioners in Denmark about green social work. Only 12% had heard about green social work prior to the study, but 79% percent regarded it as important globally and 61% as important in Denmark (Hostert 2020). Allen (2020, $N = 159$) surveyed social workers in Alaska on their perceptions of the effects of climate change on their clients and other inhabitants. 71% reported that climate change is a large threat to people in Alaska, and 36.5% saw it as a threat to their local community. They also reported health threats such as food insecurity, mental health challenges such as anxiety, and impacts on community infrastructure, e.g. electricity outages (Allen 2020.).

The personal dimension of how we understand and relate to the natural environment is central in the transformative model of the eco-social approach (Boetto 2017, 51–52). In her qualitative study among pro-environmental social workers, McKinnon (2013, $N = 20$) found that while social workers showed a high level of awareness of the relevance of environmental issues for social work practice, professional and organizational constraints prevented them from integrating environmental concerns in their professional practice (McKinnon 2013). Nevertheless, being ecologically mindful enables practitioners to identify opportunities to enact environmental awareness in social work (Boetto et al. 2020).

Previous studies conducted in Finland

It has been pointed out (Aalto 2022; Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi 2021) that only a few studies have addressed Finnish social work practitioners' attitudes towards the environment. Finnish ecosocial research has focused on the possibilities to prevent social marginalization by promoting the ecosocial approach (Matthies and Närhi 2017) and what enables or impedes applying the ecosocial approach in social work (Närhi 2022). Aalto (2022, $N = 47$) found that whereas social work master's degree students valued both the natural environment and addressing environmental issues in their private lives, the link between social work and ecological issues was not self-evident. Previous studies on the ecosocial approach have found that it is unfamiliar among Finnish social work practitioners (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi 2021). However, both social workers (Boetto, Närhi, and Bowles 2022, $N = 10$; Rainerma 2020, $N = 12$) and social work students (Aalto 2022; Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi 2021, $N = 49$) saw opportunities for integrating nature and sustainability in social work.

Previous studies on social work practitioners' perspectives on the natural environment and environmental issues are scarce and have been conducted in different social work contexts and research settings. Previous findings indicate that social work practitioners consider environmental issues important for both the social work profession in general and their clients. Hence, focusing on professionals' views on the environment and environmental issues is needed. The aim of the study was to explore the significance of the natural environment and environmental issues in social work. This study also explored whether the

importance accorded to the environment on the personal level might also be reflected, even if not integrated, into the level of professional practice. Thus, this study investigated Finnish social welfare professionals' views on environmental issues in both their personal and professional lives. The research questions were: 1) How important do social welfare professionals perceive addressing environmental issues to be in their work? 2) What kinds of environmental issues do they perceive as having the most influence on client wellbeing in Finland? 3) What background factors are associated with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work?

Methods

Data collection

This study is a part of a larger survey exploring ecosocial approach in social work in Finland. The study applied Boetto's 2017 transformative ecosocial model as a meta-level theoretical framework. The model provided a basis for the survey questionnaire.

This study explores the first two dimensions of the model, i.e. personal beliefs and professional knowledge and values in social work.

The survey questionnaire explored respondents' views on the importance of the natural environment and environmental issues in both their private and professional lives, and on the relationship between social work and the natural environment, environmental action and ecosocial work. Background information, such as gender, age, and level of education, was collected. The survey questionnaire and measures used were created for this study, as social work-specific standardized measures were not available. The questionnaire was designed by the authors in co-operation with the Talentia Board of Professional Ethics, which is the main body deliberating and formulating the ethical guidelines for social work in Finland. The questionnaire was piloted by social workers and lecturers in social work ($n = 3$), after which some response options were redefined. The survey invitation provided information on the purpose of the study, the survey questionnaire, and secure handling of the data, and emphasized that responding to the survey was voluntary.

The data were collected via an electronic survey. The survey invitation and link were sent by the Finnish Talentia Union of Professional Social Workers to its 12 000 members working in social welfare. Talentia promotes and protects the professional and wage interests of over 26 000 highly educated professionals in social welfare and early childhood education. Sending the survey invitation via the professional trade union enabled reaching the largest possible amount of social welfare professionals. The survey was not delivered to student or retiree members or to professionals working in early childhood education. The survey was conducted via an open link using the Webropol survey and reporting tool provided by the University of Jyväskylä.

The online questionnaire was available for three weeks in November 2020. Responses were received from 542 professionals (response rate 4.5%). According to Talentia, this response rate is typical for surveys forwarded by the union. The survey data can not be considered as representative, as the non-response rate was high, and as voluntary sampling often causes bias (Moore, McCabe, and Craig 2017, 190). In addition, the survey was administered in Finnish only, instead of, for example, Finnish and Swedish, which is the native language of approximately 5.3% Finns (Institute for the Languages in Finland 2022).

The survey did not collect any personally identifiable information, and hence the researchers were blinded to the identities and email addresses of the respondents. Some variables, e.g. age, in the data were categorized to further ensure anonymity. The chair and secretary of the ethics committee of the University of Jyväskylä stated that the study did not need to be reviewed, as it did not, e.g. deviate from the principle of informed consent or present a risk of mental harm to the participants or threaten their safety.

Measurements

The survey questionnaire comprised items, including in the form of claims, with a Likert response scale ranging from 1 (fully disagree or never) to 5 (fully agree or constantly), and multiple-choice questions. To explore which environment-related issues were considered relevant to social work, the questionnaire listed 14 such issues and asked the respondents to mark all those that they had observed to have a negative effect on client wellbeing. Some of the issues were drawn from a survey on environmental attitudes and habits conducted by the cities of Helsinki and Vantaa in 2018 (Hirvonen and Vanhatalo 2018), and the remainder based on the authors' experience of ecosocial work and recent developments in Finland. For example, eco-anxiety, which has been increasingly acknowledged recently (e.g. Pihkala 2020), was included in the list. Respondents were also given the opportunity to include unlisted issues. These were categorized and described in the results.

Sum scores for the perceived importance of the natural environment and for environmental issues were calculated, and the internal consistency of these measures was assessed and tested for reliability. Cronbach's alpha (α) indicated adequate internal consistency for all measures. The measurements were then used as variables in the analysis. Continuous measurements were transformed into categorical variables for clearer interpretation. These variables and their Cronbach's alpha values are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Scores (mean, SD, n, %, α) and cut-off values for the measures of the importance of the natural environment and environmental issues.

	Mean	SD
Perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work (α = .77)	**3.84**	**.830**
It is important that social welfare professionals engage in action to address environmental problems.	4.02	.892
It is important that social welfare professionals engage in action to address climate change.	4.04	.946
It is a responsibility of professionals in fields other than social work to consider the wellbeing of natural environment.	3.45	1.162
As a categorized response variable	**n**	**%**
Less than important (1.00–3.99)	252	46.5
Important (4.00–5.00)	290	53.5
	Mean	**SD**
Personal importance of natural environment and taking action (α = .79)	**4.77**	**.413**
The wellbeing of the natural environment is personally important to me.	4.83	.434
It is important to reduce problems that impact the natural environment.	4.87	.430
It is important to take action on climate change.	4.80	.540
it is important that environmental wellbeing can be considered at work.	4.58	.663
As a categorized explanatory variable	**n**	**%**
Less than highly important (1.50–4.49)	64	11.8
Highly important (4.50–5.00)	478	88.2
	Mean	**SD**
Personal importance of natural environment for wellbeing and leisure (α = .88)	**4.22**	**.749**
I look to the natural environment for improving my wellbeing.	4.20	.780
Nature is an important part of my everyday life, e.g. outdoor exercise.	4.23	.803
As a categorized explanatory variable	**n**	**%**
Less than important (1.00–3.99)	105	19.4
Important (4.00–5.00)	437	80.6
	Mean	**SD**
Personal actions to promote the wellbeing of the natural environment (α = .83)	**3.50**	**.726**
I follow news and discussion on the natural environment and climate change.	3.62	.824
I am a member of or support an environmental organization, e.g. make donations.	2.16	1.236
I recycle.	4.65	.612
I make environmentally friendly choices regarding transport.	3.41	1.220
I make environmentally friendly consumer choices.	3.57	1.092
I pay more for environmentally friendly products to protect the wellbeing of the natural environment.	3.44	.984
The wellbeing of the natural environment is crucial when I choose who to vote for in elections.	3.66	1.101
As a categorized explanatory variable	**n**	**%**
Rarely (1.00–2.99)	123	22.7
Sometimes (3.00–3.99)	257	47.4
Often (4.00–5.00)	162	29.9

Category cut-off values in parentheses

Other variables used in the analysis included the following background factors: gender, age, level of education, master's degree in social work, bachelor's degree in social services, year of graduation, years of working in social welfare, supervision/management, type of organization, and geographical area of work. Moreover, one variable on whether there is an organizational policy or guidelines in the respondent's organization (no/maybe/yes), was included.

Analysis

The first two research questions were descriptively analysed. The third research question was addressed using explanatory regression analysis to ascertain which variables were associated with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. Before the regression analysis, the means of the categorical variables were compared between groups to explore which variables were associated with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. Because the variables were not normally distributed, non-parametric tests were used: the Mann-Whitney U-test for comparisons of two groups and Kruskal-Wallis test for comparisons of more than two groups. Pearson's correlation was used to explore the associations between the continuous variables and the response variable. Correlations were pre-examined visually using scatterplots. Statistical significance was set at ≤ .05. Data were analysed using SPSS version 28.0.

Finally, using a forward-stepwise method, binary logistic regression analysis was applied to explore which of the variables that had proved significant in the preliminary analysis best predicted the variation in the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. The response variable in the binary logistic regression model was divided into two categories: less than important (1.00- 3.99) and important (4.00- 5.00). Membership of the latter category indicated that the respondent considered the natural environment and addressing environmental issues important in social work. 53.5% of cases were in this category ($n = 288$). Binary logistic regression computes the likelihood or odds ratio of belonging to the category of interest. The final model's overall ability to classify cases correctly was 69.1%. Owing to missing data, the regression analysis was conducted for 538 cases.

Results

Participants

The data are described in Table 2. The respondents worked in various fields ranging from social services for different client groups, health care, education, and youth work. Approximately 30% of the survey respondents had a social work qualification ($n = 170$), and 69% ($n = 376$) had a bachelor's degree in social services, gerontology, or rehabilitation. 48 of bachelor's degree holders had also acquired a master's degree in social work. Of the 542 respondents, 44 (8.1%) had some other educational qualification. The survey respondents were broadly representative of the Talentia membership in their background characteristics: 93% of Talentia members are women and 70% of members are employed by municipalities. The biggest member groups are social services professionals, social workers, and students. Educationally, 67% have a bachelor's degree and 20% a master's degree (Talentia 2022.). Talentia is the only trade union established specifically for social welfare professionals with higher education in Finland, where the trade union membership rate is high. In 2017, for example, the overall membership rate, excluding, e.g. entrepreneur, student and retiree members, was 59.4% (Ahtiainen 2019).

Perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work

Social work involvement in reducing environmental problems was generally perceived as important by the survey respondents. 77.5% ($n = 420$) fully or to some extent agreed that it is important that

Table 2. Descriptive data ($N = 542$).

	n	%
Gender		
Female	500	92.3
Male	38	7.0
Missing information	4	0.7
Age		
20- 29	45	8.3
30- 39	149	27.5
40- 49	156	28.8
50- 59	134	24.7
60- 69	58	10.7
Level of education		
Secondary level degree	13	2.4
Bachelor's degree	328	60.5
Master's degree	189	34.9
Postgraduate degree	12	2.2
Year of graduation		
2011- 2020	277	51.1
2001- 2010	142	26.2
1980- 2000	123	22.7
Years of working in social welfare		
<5	114	21.1
6- 15	204	37.6
16- 25	146	26.9
>25	78	14.4
Supervisory/managerial duties		
Yes	92	17.0
Sometimes (e.g. fill-in)	55	10.1
No	395	72.9
Type of organization		
Public	381	70.3
Private	108	19.9
Third	53	9.8
Geographical area of work		
Urban	341	62.9
Rural	102	18.8
Both	99	18.3

social welfare professionals engage in action to address environmental issues, 17.2% ($n = 93$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 5.3% ($n = 29$) fully or to some extent disagreed with the claim. Similarly, 75.8% ($n = 411$) fully or to some extent agreed that it is important that social welfare professionals address climate change, whereas 17.9% ($n = 97$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 6.3% ($n = 34$) disagreed with the claim. We also presented the reverse claim that consideration of the wellbeing of the natural environment is a responsibility for professionals in other fields than social welfare. 54.2% ($n = 294$) fully or partially disagreed with the claim, 22.1% ($n = 120$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and nearly one in four respondents, 23.6% ($n = 128$), fully or partially agreed with the claim.

Views on the links between environmental issues and client wellbeing were explored through two claims in the questionnaire. The first, that 'environmental problems, such as global warming, adversely impact the wellbeing of clients', received full or partial agreement from 69.0% ($n = 374$) and full or partial disagreement from 12.2% ($n = 66$) of respondents. 18.8% ($n = 102$) neither agreed nor disagreed with the claim. The other claim, that 'social problems and environmental problems are intertwined', gained less support: 54.3% ($n = 294$) agreed, 24.9% ($n = 135$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and 20.8% ($n = 113$) disagreed with the claim.

78.8% ($n = 427$) of the respondents agreed that social work education should raise awareness of the relationship between social work and the natural environment, 15.5% ($n = 84$) neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 5.7% ($n = 31$) disagreed. Likewise, 73.6% ($n = 399$) agreed, 17.9% ($n = 97$)

neither agreed nor disagreed, and only 8.5% ($n = 46$) disagreed that social work ethical guidelines should also include the wellbeing of the natural environment. On the issue of whether the environment is considered in the participants' workplaces, 28.2% ($n = 153$) stated that their organization had an environmental policy or guidelines and 37.5% ($n = 203$) that it did not. The rest, 34.3% ($n = 186$), were not sure if there was a policy or not.

In their personal life outside social work, most respondents fully agreed that they regard the wellbeing of the natural environment and taking action to reduce environmental problems and climate change as important (mean 4.8 on a 1 (fully disagree) to 5 (fully agree) response scale). They often looked to the natural environment to improve their wellbeing or for leisure (mean 4.2). The respondents' personal actions to promote the wellbeing of natural environment (mean 3.5) did not quite match their perceptions of the importance of the natural environment. While the respondents reported frequent recycling and often or sometimes considering the environment when making consumer choices or choosing a candidate in elections, they rarely belonged or made donations to environmental organizations.

In sum, the present Finnish survey results showed that social welfare professionals considered it important that environmental issues are addressed in social work. Both the natural environment and environmental actions were also considered important in personal life. Most felt that the natural environment should be integrated into both professional education and ethical guidelines. Environmental issues were thought to affect client wellbeing. Nevertheless, the links between social and environmental problems were not thought to be evident, and almost one in four respondents reported that taking the wellbeing of the natural environment into account is predominantly the responsibility of other professional fields.

Environment-related phenomena observed to impair client wellbeing

The questionnaire instructed the respondents to mark the phenomena that they had observed as negatively affecting their clients' wellbeing. Most respondents reported at least a few environmental issues that they had observed as having a negative effect on clients' wellbeing. The most frequently reported were the increasing concentrations of the population in certain areas and desolation of rural areas, anxiety related to environmental issues, and loss of green spaces. All the phenomena listed are shown in Table 3.

Ten or more of the 14 phenomena listed in the survey were marked by 49 (9.0%) of the respondents, seven to nine by 104 (19.2%), four to six by 192 (35.4%), one to three by 186 (34.3%), and none by 11 (2.0%). The median number was five, i.e. half of the respondents had

Table 3. Environment-related phenomena observed to affect client wellbeing.

	n	%
Concentrations of the population in certain areas*	333	61.4
Anxiety related to environmental issues*	313	57.7
Desolation of rural areas*	295	54.4
Loss and monotonousness of nearby greenspace	251	46.3
Snowless winters becoming more common	235	43.4
Hot weather becoming more common	208	38.4
Harm induced by traffic, such as pollution and noise	204	37.6
Weakening air quality*	191	35.2
Environmental pollution or chemicalization*	160	29.5
Migration and/or immigration induced by climate change	160	29.5
Weakening condition of bodies of water	140	25.8
Stormy weather becoming more common	125	23.1
Decreasing availability of groceries	69	12.7
Flooding becoming more common	50	9.2
Other, please specify	27	5.0

Phenomena marked with * added by the researchers, otherwise taken from Hirvonen & Vanhatalo (2018).

observed a maximum of five phenomena and half of the respondents five or more. The number of listed phenomena most frequently marked by respondents was three ($n = 83$).

Phenomena not listed in the survey but added by the survey respondents were infectious diseases and coronavirus (3), difficulty in making environmentally-friendly choices and actions (2), slippery outdoor conditions (2), rising cost of groceries (2), increase in extreme and challenging agricultural conditions (1), a decreasing number of children in the area (1), long distances to services (1), low availability of inexpensive rental accommodation (1), problems in the availability of medication (1), employee turnover in social services (1), and migrants' concern over family members struggling with weakened life conditions following natural disasters in their home country (1). Eight respondents reported either not having observed any of the listed phenomena (7) or not knowing if they had (1). Three stated that they didn't see the connection, that the media exaggerates things, or that these phenomena concern everyone and not just social work.

Factors associated with perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work

Gender, professional qualifications (bachelor's degree in social services), type of organization, whether there is an environmental policy in the work organization, and the significance of the natural environment and of environmental action in the respondent's personal life explained the variation in the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work (Table 4).

The variables that proved significant were further entered in regression analysis to identify those that best explained the perception that it is important to address environmental issues in social work (mean ≥4.00). Here, the odds ratios indicate the likelihood that addressing environmental issues is perceived as important compared to the reference category (the first category of each variable). The best explanatory variables and their odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals are presented in Table 5.

The social welfare professionals who ranked taking action to protect the natural environment as highly important in their personal lives were more than four times (OR = 4.765) more likely than those who gave this variable a lower ranking to perceive addressing environmental issues as important in social work. Likewise, social welfare professionals who reported sometimes conducting environment-friendly actions in their personal lives – such as recycling, sustainable traffic choices, or supporting environmental organizations – were three times (OR = 2.938) more likely than those who reported rarely doing these things to perceive addressing environmental issues as important in their professional practice. In turn, those who reported often conducting these actions

Table 4. Variables and p-values in Mann-Whitney U-tests, Kruskal-Wallis-tests, and Pearson correlation.

Variable	Mann-Whitney U p-value	Kruskal-Wallis p-value
Gender	.021*	
Age		.485
Level of education		.645
Bachelor's degree in social services	.039*	
Master's degree in social work	.441	
Year of graduation		.741
Years of working in social welfare		.121
Supervisory/managerial duties		.922
Type of organization		.005*
Working in urban or rural areas		.081
Environmental policy in organization		.009*
Variable	Pearson correlation R	p-value
Personal importance of natural environment and taking action	.506	<.001**
Significance of natural environment for wellbeing and leisure	.251	<.001**
Personal actions to promote wellbeing of natural environment	.501	<.001**

Statistically significant variables are marked with * ($p < .05$) or ** ($p < .001$).

Table 5. Variables associated with perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work (logistic regression analysis).

Explanatory variable	Coefficient B	OR	P	95% CI
Type of organization				
Public sector		1	<.001	
Private sector	.814	2.258	.002	1.363– 3.739
Third sector	.933	2.541	.008	1.269– 5.090
Personal importance of the natural environment and taking action				
Less than highly important		1		
Highly important	1.561	4.765	<.001	2.169– 10.465
Personal actions to promote wellbeing of natural environment				
Rarely		1	<.001	
Sometimes	1.078	2.938	<.001	1.742– 4.954
Often	2.225	9.251	<.001	5.062– 16.907

R2 = .207 (Cox and Snell) and .276 (Nagelkerke); Hosmer and Lemeshow test (p = .965).

in their personal lives were nine times (OR = 9.251) more likely to perceive addressing environmental issues as important in social work than those who reported rarely doing so.

In addition, the type of organization was significant. Compared to social welfare professionals working in the public sector (municipal or state organizations or social and health care districts), counterparts working in private companies (OR = 2.258) or third sector organizations (OR = 2.541) were approximately twice as likely to consider it important to address environmental issues in social work.

Discussion

This study investigated social welfare professionals' views on the importance of addressing environmental issues in social work in Finland and related background factors. Environment-related phenomena observed by social workers to impair clients' wellbeing were also explored.

The Finnish survey results showed that most of the participants perceived addressing environmental issues in social work as from fairly to very important. The results support previous findings (e.g. Marlow and Van Rooyen 2001) that social work practitioners perceive the natural environment and environmental issues in principle as important in social work. Those who perceived the natural environment as highly important and took action to address environmental issues in their personal lives also perceived it important to address environmental issues in social work. Nevertheless, almost one in four respondents reported that taking the wellbeing of the natural environment into account is predominantly the responsibility of other professional fields. Furthermore, almost one in five respondents neither agreed nor disagreed when inquired about the importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. This might suggest neutrality, but also raises the question of whether these respondents have previously properly considered the relationship between social work and the natural environment. The results indicate that shared understanding and/or more knowledge is needed on the interrelationship between social work and the natural environment.

The results further showed that the type of employer organization was associated with social welfare professionals' perceptions of the importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. Professionals employed in private and third sector organizations were more likely than their public sector counterparts to consider addressing environmental issues in social work as important. The reason for this remains unknown, and hence further research on the topic is needed. A potential explanation lies in the different nature of the services provided by the public and private sectors: e.g. private companies often provide residential services. Working in residential services might offer professionals more possibilities to take environmental issues into account when assisting clients in their everyday lives and to enjoy the natural environment together with their clients. Moreover, organizations differ in other respects. For instance, smaller organizations may have more flexibility when it comes to

integrating environmental issues into their work (Boetto et al. 2020). Furthermore, could it be that professionals in some organizations are more inclined than others to depict themselves and the organization they represent as 'green', especially if their organization highlights the importance of the environment? Again, more research is needed on what enables or hinders consideration of the natural environment and environmental issues in daily social work practice.

Most respondents reported at least a few environmental issues that negatively affect client wellbeing. The most frequent of these were the increasing concentration of the population in certain areas, desolation of rural areas, anxiety over environmental issues, loss of green spaces, snowless winters, and exceptionally hot weather. Some issues were local, some global. Not all were strictly environmental issues but outcomes from more complex social, economic, and environmental processes. The survey by Hirvonen and Vanhatalo (2018) in Helsinki-Vantaa area found that the majority of their respondents were at least to some degree concerned about environmental issues. On the global level, extreme weather and migration accelerated by climate change, for example, were perceived as worrying. Local concerns included loss of green spaces and snowless, and hence darker, winters. The results are not directly comparable, owing to differences in the participants, data collection area, item format, response options, and the scales used. Nevertheless, the results of our survey and that of Hirvonen and Vanhatalo (2018) point to similar concerns. In our survey, while the order of frequency indicates which phenomena were perceived as most relevant to wellbeing, the results do not specify their effects on wellbeing, not to mention the extent or mechanisms of those effects. Further research is thus needed on the actual effects of environment-related phenomena on social work clients' wellbeing.

Although environmental issues and addressing them were considered important, the environment does not yet feature in the workplaces of social welfare professionals. Less than a third of the respondents stated that their organization had an environmental policy or guideline, whereas almost 40% reported the opposite. This calls for discussion and more research. If we want social welfare professionals to take action to address environmental issues in social work, they, along with their employers and their workplaces, must first acknowledge this need. Moreover, to be able to internalize ecosocial work as an integral part of social work requires that professionals examine their work from an ecosocial perspective (Boetto et al. 2020).

The results of this study reflect the first two dimensions of Boetto's (2017) transformative ecosocial model: personal beliefs and attitudes towards the natural environment and professional knowledge and values in social work. The results support Boetto's idea that professionals who see the natural environment as significant in their private life also tend to evaluate it important in the context of their work.

It is important to understand social work practitioners' perspectives in order to support them in responding to the challenges presented by, e.g. climate change (Allen 2020). This study adds to the limited knowledge on social work practitioners' views on the natural environment and environmental issues in social work, as previous survey studies on the topic are scarce (Aalto 2022, 22; Hostert 2020, 28–29). This study also provides an example of an empirical study on the relationship between social work and the natural environment. Although the findings are specific to Finland, they likely apply at least to the other Nordic welfare states.

Our findings are important for understanding the social work profession in relation to the natural environment, addressing environmental issues and the transition to sustainability. It has been argued in the social work literature that it is important for social work to acknowledge the effects of environmental issues on clients and to participate in the transition towards sustainability. To engage professionals in this, we first need to understand their views on the relationship between social work and the environment. This study gathered the most extensive data available on the views of social welfare professionals on the importance of addressing environmental issues in social work in Finland. The data are also ample when compared internationally and support earlier findings that social work practitioners are positive about integrating environmental issues into social work.

Finally, the results suggest that it is important to acknowledge environmental issues not only in social work practice but also in social work education and professional ethical guidelines.

Limitations

This survey has its limitations. Despite reminders, the response rate was low (4.5%). As was the case with Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001, 250), it is reasonable to assume that the survey was answered primarily by social welfare professionals interested in the environment. Due to the low response rate and the fact that the respondents were recruited via the professional social workers' union Talentia, it is more appropriate to consider the data as a sample rather than as a representative sample of social welfare professionals or even of Talentia members working in social welfare. For example, as many of the survey respondents were resident in the most densely populated areas of Finland, it would be fair to say that some areas or views are underrepresented.

We did not use any standardized measures, as no such social work-specific measures were found in the literature. Thus, the measures used were created for this study. Some of the expressions and concepts in the survey, such as the natural environment, are prone to varying interpretations (Shaw 2011) and translations from Finnish into English. Moreover, we asked the respondents to report environment-related phenomena that had affected their clients' wellbeing but not the number of clients who had been so affected or the cause-effect relationship. Further research is also needed on the actual effects of environment-related phenomena on wellbeing. For all its limitations, this is the first extensive data collected among Finnish social welfare professionals on the importance they attribute to the natural environment and environmental issues in social work.

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