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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Ecosocial work among social welfare professionals in Finland: Key learnings for future practice

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Abstract

An ecosocial approach implies integrating social and ecological sustainability on all levels of social work practice (Boetto, *British Journal of Social Work*, 2017:47(1), 48–67). This survey study explored the frequency of ecosocial work practices in Finnish social work and the factors that enable or hinder adopting ecosocial work in social work practice. The study found that ecosocial work practices are quite rarely applied in Finnish social work. It indicates that personal interest in and knowledge of the ecosocial approach, organizational practices, and client attitudes play an important role. Social welfare professionals as well as the organizations where they work should be informed of environmental issues affecting human wellbeing and of the ecosocial approach in social work. This study examines the present state of the ecosocial approach in Finnish social work and provides opportunities to reflect on the relationship between social work and the natural environment.

KEYWORDS

ecosocial work, environment, social services, social welfare, social work

INTRODUCTION

The ecosocial approach and environmental issues have emerged on the social work agenda due to the need to respond to and mitigate the climate crisis and global environmental problems and their effects on human wellbeing (e.g., IFSW, 2022). Within the social work literature, many concepts such as the ecosocial approach (Närhi & Matthies, 2001; Peeters, 2012), green social work (Dominelli, 2012; Dominelli et al., 2018), environmental social work (Gray et al., 2013; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017), and ecological social work (Besthorn, 2015; McKinnon & Alston, 2016) highlight the need to capture the relationship between social work and the natural environment. Their common premise is

that the natural environment should be incorporated into social work values and practice. They also stress that social work skills and methods can be applied to develop responses to environmental changes, and that social work should actively promote general societal change toward sustainability (Besthorn, 2015, p. 874; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). This study applies the concept of the ecosocial approach according to its already established use in the Finnish social work context (e.g., Matthies & Närhi, 2017; Närhi & Matthies, 2001). As a concept combining holistic, community based, indigenous, and global viewpoints (Boetto, 2017), it explicates the intertwined nature of social, environmental, and economic issues. The approach recognizes the interdependence of humans and the natural environment and

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argues for considering the wellbeing of the natural environment alongside human wellbeing (Norton, 2012).

This study is based on a survey ($N = 542$) conducted among the members of Talentia, Finland's largest trade union for social welfare professionals with a higher education. The article explores the prevalence of ecosocial work practices in Finnish social work, as well as the factors either enabling or hindering their adoption. The research questions are the following: (1) How frequently is ecosocial work implemented in social work practices in Finland? (2) What factors are associated with the frequency of applying ecosocial work?

This study is a part of a larger research project exploring social welfare professionals' views on the natural environment, environmental issues, and the ecosocial approach in social work in Finland (Nöjd et al., 2023). This research project adds to the heretofore small number of survey studies on the ecosocial approach in social work. Previous research has been mainly theoretical, and there are few instances of empirical research or practice examples (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). Although the findings of this study are specific to Finland, they are informative regarding similar social work in Nordic welfare state contexts. The results of this study provide suggestions on how to create possibilities to integrate the ecosocial approach in social work. Furthermore, it provides an example of an empirical study of the ecosocial approach and its applications in social work practice.

The study context

In Finland, social work has traditionally been mostly a public sector-driven professional field focusing mainly on individuals and families, while the role of community work has been marginal (Roivainen, 2009). In this article, social work is understood broadly. It includes a variety of jobs related to social welfare conducted by professionals with differing educational backgrounds, most often a master's degree in social work or a bachelor's degree in social services. Though these degrees qualify workers for different occupational roles, they both draw from social work theory and tradition, providing a general approach and tools applicable to different fields in social welfare (Lähteinen et al., 2017). Professionals with a master's degree in social work most often work as social workers or managers in social welfare. Professionals with a bachelor's degree in social services often work as instructors or counselors, providing guidance and assisting individuals and families in the service system and in their everyday lives (Talentia, 2022). While both roles include work with service users, social workers have more administrative work combined with more power and responsibility to decide about social work processes.

Based on previous social work research from different contexts and research settings, including both theoretical and empirical approaches, we formulated three preliminary assumptions to help develop the survey questions: (a) the environmental perspective is not prominent in social work or organizational practices (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021); (b) the majority of social work practitioners have difficulties to envision ecosocial practices applicable to their own work (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021); and (c) the more important the natural environment is for social work practitioners personally (Boetto, 2017), and the more they have knowledge of and organizational support for the implementation of ecosocial work (Boetto et al., 2020; Boetto et al., 2022), the more often they apply the ecosocial approach in their work. In what follows, we briefly outline the ecosocial approach in social work and the methods of this study, thereafter proceeding to discuss the findings and conclusions of this study.

ECOSOCIAL APPROACH IN SOCIAL WORK

The transformative model of ecosocial work developed by Boetto (2017) describes the three dimensions crucial for the actualization of the ecosocial approach: being, thinking, and doing. *Being* refers to personal identity, values, and connectedness to nature; *thinking* to personal and professional knowledge and values in social work; and *doing* to social work practices. An ecosocial approach strives to integrate environmental aspects with social aspects on all levels of social work practice: personal, individual, group, community, and structural (Boetto, 2017). The transformative model of ecosocial work (Boetto, 2017) has been applied as a theoretical framework for this study. It provides a structure through which the ecosocial approach can be examined.

In this article, ecosocial work refers to applying an ecosocial approach in social work. Essentially, this means integrating the natural environment into social work practice. In social work practice, ecosocial work translates into, for example, assessment and intervention on the micro level; organizational and community work on the meso-level; and advocacy, policymaking, and promoting ecological justice on the macro level (Norton, 2012). There are many interpretations of integrating the ecosocial approach in social work, but applications of it in practice are still scant (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). The ecosocial approach, however, goes beyond integrating the natural environment into social work values and practice. It calls instead for a profound change of current social work practice: recognizing the interdependence of all life, moving from an individual perspective to collective and global perspectives, and embracing new approaches to wellbeing (Boetto, 2017).

Strengthening the relationship of people with the natural environment is essential to promote ecosocial work. It promotes client wellbeing while also encouraging environmental consciousness and pro-environmental attitudes and actions, thereby broadening social work ideas on how to promote wellbeing (Rabb, 2017, pp. 134–137). Accordingly, all the practices explored in this study do not yet reflect a profound change in social work values and traditional approaches. Nonetheless, they aim to promote human wellbeing by connecting humans with the natural environment. Furthermore, to embrace a holistic view on sustainability, its social, ecological, and economic dimensions are all essential and need to be recognized (Peeters, 2017, pp. 147–148).

Previous research on ecosocial work

Finnish social work research on the ecosocial approach has explored a range of issues. These include social innovations to promote the sustainability transition (Matthies et al., 2019), possibilities to prevent social marginalization by promoting sustainable practices (Matthies & Närhi, 2017), the relations of the ecosocial approach to structural social work (Närhi & Matthies, 2018), and the effects of the physical environment on marginalization processes (Närhi, 2002). The ecosocial approach is rare in Finnish social work, and it has only recently been included in the social work curriculums of some universities (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021, p. 613). Nevertheless, previous studies on the ecosocial approach in Finnish social work and related services indicate that social work students and professionals identify opportunities for integrating the natural environment and sustainability into their work (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021; Stamm, 2023).

Internationally, research on the ecosocial approach in social work provides some existing practice approaches and applications. Australian social workers ($N = 9$) recognized the ecosocial approach on personal, individual, group, and organizational levels of social work practice in a number of areas. These included integrating the natural environment in their work with individuals, developing group-based interventions related to the outdoors or sustainable living, sharing information with colleagues, and introducing sustainable practices at the workplace. Ecosocial work on the community and structural level was rare (Boetto et al., 2020). A group of Finnish and Australian social workers ($N = 19$) identified the ecosocial approach in individual therapeutic interventions, nature-based mindfulness, and group activities, integration of environmentally friendly household ideas into skills groups, in-service professional development for staff, and organizational sustainability practices such as composting, energy saving, and recycling waste (Boetto et al., 2022). In a

survey on social work and environmental justice conducted in a midwestern US state ($N = 373$), social workers indicated having little education on the relationship between social work and environmental issues, but they nevertheless recognized means of action, such as community organizing and advocacy (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). Although previous studies reveal some current ecosocial practices in social work, their commonness among social work or social welfare professionals remains unknown.

Examples of practice applications of ecosocial work continue to be scant (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017), and the reasons behind this are of interest. Even pro-environmental attitudes do not necessarily translate into integrating the environment into social work practice, at least partly due to organizational barriers (Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001; McKinnon, 2013). The enablers and barriers, organizational or otherwise, have been touched on lightly in qualitative studies discussing the ecosocial approach among Australian and Finnish social work practitioners (Boetto et al., 2020; Boetto et al., 2022). For example, the following elements were presented as enablers of the ecosocial approach: the relatively small size of an organization, flexible work roles and tasks that allow for ecosocial interventions, and being ecologically mindful (Boetto et al., 2020). Furthermore, support from colleagues and management as well as a strategic approach to practice were brought up (Boetto et al., 2020; Boetto et al., 2022). The possible organizational barriers include an understanding of the natural environment as separate from humans and their wellbeing; a lack of resources, knowledge, and organizational policy to integrate the natural environment into social work (Boetto et al., 2020); and an organizational culture that is not open to new ideas (Boetto et al., 2022). These previous studies have discussed the ecosocial approach in depth with social work practitioners but involved a small number of participants. Thus they provide only a glance at some possible enablers or barriers to applying ecosocial work. Some survey studies have been conducted among social work students, but not practitioners (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021). Empirical research on ecosocial work, especially on micro-level practice, is called for (Boetto et al., 2022). An explorative approach involving social work practitioners is therefore justifiable, as it helps to identify these barriers and enablers and assess their significance.

METHODS

Data collection

The data were collected via an electronic survey sent by the Finnish Talentia Union of Professional Social Workers to its 12,000 members working in social welfare, excluding student and retiree members and professionals working in early

childhood education. Talentia promotes the professional and salary interests of over 26,000 professionals and is the only trade union explicitly for social welfare professionals in Finland, where trade union membership rate is high.

The survey questionnaire explored the 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. Because ecosocial work as a concept and practice was not necessarily familiar to respondents (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021), they were provided with a broad definition of ecosocial work that was formulated by the authors: "The basis of ecosocial work is that humans are part of nature. Humankind is dependent on the delicate balance of earth's ecosystems. Directly or indirectly, disruption of this balance shakes the wellbeing of humans. Ecosocial work promotes the wellbeing of social work clients in an ecologically, socially, economically, and culturally sustainable manner." The questionnaire was designed by the authors. It was piloted by social workers and lecturers ($n = 3$) and the Talentia Board of Professional Ethics, which is the main body deliberating and formulating the ethical guidelines for social work practice in Finland.

The survey was conducted via the Webropol survey tool provided by the University of Jyväskylä. The online questionnaire was available for 3 weeks in November 2020. The response rate was 4.5% ($n = 542$), which was typical for surveys conducted via Talentia. The survey data should be considered a sample, bearing in mind that the non-response rate was high and that voluntary sampling often causes bias (Moore et al., 2017, p. 190).

The survey invitation provided information on the study, the questionnaire, and handling of the data, and emphasized that responding to the survey was voluntary. The email addresses of the respondents were not revealed to the researchers, and the survey did not collect any personally identifiable information. The secretary and chair of the ethics committee of the University of Jyväskylä evaluated that this project requires no statement because none of the six official criteria for mandatory statement was fulfilled, meaning there was no deviation from the principle of informed consent, risk of mental harm to participants, or threat to their safety.

Variables and measurements

The first research question examined the frequency of ecosocial work. To explore the frequency of ecosocial work practices among social welfare professionals, the

questionnaire provided readily defined practices and inquired about their frequency in the respondent's work. The example practices captured different levels of social work, including individual, group, community, and structural levels. The authors formulated the set of example practices on the basis of previous literature on ecosocial work. There was also an opportunity to mention some other ecosocial work practice that one has tried or promoted at work. When measuring the frequency of the ecosocial practices, the response options varied from 1 to 5, 1 meaning "never" and 5 "constantly." There was also an option to choose "not applicable in my work".

The second research question explored the factors associated with the frequency of applying ecosocial work. The variables used in the analysis included questions on the frequency of ecosocial work practices, and questions on the knowledge of integrating the environment into work, support for ecosocial work in the respondent's organization, clients' interest in the ecosocial approach, and the personal importance of the natural environment and addressing environmental issues. In the case of other questions than frequency, 1 meant "fully disagree" and 5 "fully agree." When assessing perceptions of clients' interest in the ecosocial approach, there was also an option to choose "not applicable in my work." In addition, the following background variables were used: gender, master's degree in social work (yes/no) and bachelor's degree in social services (yes/no), years of working in social welfare, and type of organization (public/private/third).

When exploring the factors that are associated with the frequency of ecosocial work practices, the response variable was computed as a mean score of variables describing the frequency of ecosocial work practices in the respondent's work when at least five variables were applicable ($M = 2.53$, $SD = 0.71$, $n = 490$). The internal consistency of the response variable was both assessed and tested for reliability with Cronbach's alpha ($\alpha = 0.869$). The cut-off point for the categorized response variable in the logistic regression analysis was 2.5.

A sum variable measuring the personal importance for each respondent of addressing environmental issues was included in the analysis as an explanatory variable ($M = 4.8$, $\alpha = 0.79$). This consisted of the following claims (on a scale from 1 to 5): (1) The wellbeing of natural environment is personally important to me ($M = 4.8$), (2) It is important to reduce problems that impact the natural environment ($M = 4.9$), (3) It is important to act on climate change ($M = 4.8$), and (4) It is important that environmental wellbeing can be considered at work ($M = 4.6$).

For the logistic regression analysis, the measurements that were used as explanatory variables, ranging from 1 to 5, were transformed into categorical variables for clearer interpretation, and due to the skewed distribution

of certain variables. In the case of the response variable, the categories were never or rarely ($0 = 1.00 - 2.50$, $n = 200$) and more often than rarely ($1 = 2.51 - 5.00$, $n = 203$). The Likert scale explanatory variables were categorized as follows: fully or somewhat disagrees and neither agrees nor disagrees (0) and fully or somewhat agrees (1). Only the personal importance of addressing environmental issues, a sum variable, differed from this due to the skewedness of the variable: the cut-off point for the categorized variable was 4.5, with the latter category (1) consisting of respondents for whom the importance of addressing environmental issues was very high.

Analysis

The first research question regarding the frequency of ecosocial work practices was descriptively analyzed. The open-ended responses ($n = 16$) describing ecosocial practices were categorized. The second research question was addressed using explanatory analysis to explore which variables were associated with the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work. The minimal previous research did not enable a predefined model to be formulated and tested. Therefore, an exploratory approach was used. SPSS version 28.0 was used for data analysis. The statistical significance was set at ≤ 0.05 .

Respondents who assessed the frequency of at least five practices were included in the analysis to explore the factors that best predicted applying ecosocial work. Group means of ecosocial work practices were compared with an independent samples *t*-test (two groups) and one-way analysis of variance (more than two groups). The nonparametric Mann–Whitney *U* test and Kruskal–Wallis test were applied to confirm statistically significant results due to unequal group sizes and unequal variances in groups in some comparisons (Levene $p < 0.05$). These tests were also used because the response variable was not normally distributed in all groups (Kolmogorov–Smirnov $p < 0.05$).

Finally, logistic regression analysis was applied to identify which of the variables best predicted the odds of applying ecosocial practices in social work more often than rarely. Logistic regression is used to calculate a model that predicts the odds of a particular response category. The forward-stepwise method was applied to find the best explanatory model. The regression analysis was conducted for 403 cases. The missing data were due to the option “not applicable in my work” in the questions regarding the clientele. The final model’s overall ability to classify cases correctly was 79.4%.

RESULTS

The results revealed the frequency of ecosocial work practices among Finnish social welfare professionals. The results also described whether the professionals perceived that they or their organizations possess the necessary knowledge to take into account the wellbeing of the natural environment in social work, and whether the professionals perceived that there is support available for ecosocial work in their organization. Furthermore, the results indicated which factors appeared to be the best to determine whether ecosocial work is applied in social work practice.

Participants

The respondents ($N = 542$) were from various fields ranging from social services for different client groups, education, health care, and youth work (Table 1).

The survey respondents were broadly representative of the Talentia membership in their background characteristics: mostly women (93% in Talentia) and mostly employed by the public sector (70% of Talentia members were employed by municipalities in 2022). Educationally,

TABLE 1 Description of participants.

		<i>n</i>	%
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
Degree in social work	Yes	170	31.4
	No	372	68.6
Degree in social services	Yes	328	60.5
	No	214	39.5
Years of work in social welfare	0–5 years	114	21.1
	6–15 years	204	37.6
	16–25 years	146	26.9
	>25 years	78	14.4
Type of organization	Public	381	70.3
	Private	108	19.9
	Third	53	9.8

67% of Talentia members have a bachelor's degree and 20% a master's degree (Talentia, 2022). In comparison, 31% of the survey respondents had a social work qualification ($n = 170$), and 61% ($n = 328$) had a bachelor's degree in social services, gerontology, or rehabilitation as their highest degree (Table 1).

Forty-eight had both a master's degree in social work and a bachelor's degree in social services, and these were regarded as social work degree holders in the data. Among the respondents 44 (8%) had neither a master's degree in social work nor a bachelor's degree in social services. These individuals worked in social welfare and had some other relevant educational qualification applicable in the field.

The frequency of ecosocial work practices among social welfare professionals

To explore the frequency of ecosocial work practices among social welfare professionals, the questionnaire provided some readily defined practices and inquired about their frequency in the respondent's work. The practices are presented in descending order of frequency in Table 2.

Especially discussions on the significance of nature in everyday life or sustainability aspects—social, ecological, and economic sustainability—were at least occasionally had by social welfare professionals with their clients. Of these, social sustainability and the significance of nature and animals in clients' lives were considered most often when talking with clients. Ecological or economic sustainability were more sparsely discussed. Roughly about one in 10 respondents (7.6%–12.2%, depending on the practice) replied that these practices are not applicable in their work. More than half of the respondents incorporated the natural environment at least occasionally in their client work. Other practices incorporating animals or environmental issues in social work were conducted mostly rarely or never. The number of respondents stating that those practices are not applicable in their work was notably high (14.0%–26.2%, depending on the practice).

Respondents could also mention some other ecosocial work practice they have tried or promoted at work. There were 16 responses describing ecosocial practices. Recycling and reducing food waste ($n = 7$), nature-facilitated work such as green care or nature adventures for youth ($n = 4$), increasing awareness through conversations or teaching ($n = 4$), and eco-support personnel and environmental working groups at the workplace ($n = 3$) were mentioned a few times. Furthermore, taking part in environmental work groups as a social welfare representative,

supporting a sense of community and locality, and the possibility for digital contact for service users were also mentioned.

To summarize, social welfare professionals occasionally talked about the importance of nature and the different dimensions of sustainability with their clients. The natural environment was sometimes integrated into work, for example meeting clients outdoors. Animal-facilitated work or community or structural approaches to ecosocial work were rarely applied.

Knowledge on and support for ecosocial work

There were two claims exploring if professionals and their work communities possess enough information and knowledge to consider the natural environment in their everyday work, four claims assessing the possibilities and support for ecosocial work in the organization, and two claims assessing client interest in the ecosocial approach.

The claim “I do not know how to consider the well-being of the natural environment in social work practice” was partially or fully disagreed with by 49.6% ($n = 269$) of the respondents. It was partially or fully agreed with, or neither agreed or disagreed with by 50.4% ($n = 273$) (1 = fully agree to 5 = fully disagree: $M = 3.2$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.09$). Regarding their organization, 35.0% ($n = 190$) agreed that in their organization there is enough information on environmental problems to operate in an environmentally friendly way, whereas 65.0% ($n = 352$) disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with this claim ($M = 2.9$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.13$). Therefore, half of the respondents perceived they know how they can consider the wellbeing of the natural environment in their work. Nevertheless, approximately only one in three stated there is enough information in their organization to enable operating in an environmentally friendly way.

Regarding support for ecosocial work in the organizations, 42.0% ($n = 228$) of the respondents somewhat or fully agreed that there is interest in ecosocial work in their organization. As for the rest, 58.0% ($n = 314$) neither agreed or disagreed or somewhat or fully disagreed with the claim ($M = 3.1$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.10$). The claim that developing ecosocial work practice is supported by the management was somewhat or fully agreed with by 27.9% of the respondents ($n = 151$). It was disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with by 72.1% ($n = 391$; $M = 2.8$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.13$). Furthermore, only 20.8% ($n = 113$) somewhat or fully agreed that there are possibilities, for example, resources, to develop ecosocial work in practice ($M = 2.4$, $Mdn = 2$, $SD = 1.14$). When asked

TABLE 2 Frequency of ecosocial work practices on the scale 1 (never) to 5 (constantly).

	Mean	Median	SD
I talk to my clients about social sustainability (e.g., sense of community, equity). (<i>n</i> = 501)	3.4	3	1.00
I talk to my clients about the significance of nature or animals in their life. (<i>n</i> = 487)	3.1	3	0.96
I incorporate the natural environment into my work with clients, e.g., take walks in nature or urban outdoor environments with my clients. (<i>n</i> = 466)	3.0	3	1.29
I talk to my clients about environmentally friendly choices, e.g., recycling. (<i>n</i> = 482)	2.9	3	1.03
I talk to my clients about economic sustainability (e.g., avoiding overconsumption). (<i>n</i> = 477)	2.8	3	1.05
I talk to my clients about ecological sustainability (e.g., addressing environmental problems or climate change). (<i>n</i> = 476)	2.5	3	0.91
I incorporate animal-facilitated approaches in my work. (<i>n</i> = 413)	1.9	2	1.06
I work with client groups to promote environmentally friendly solutions, e.g., discuss environmental issues in client panels. (<i>n</i> = 400)	1.9	2	0.96
In my work I participate in organizing community ecosocial projects (e.g., food waste dinner parties, community gardening or urban farming). (<i>n</i> = 412)	1.8	1	1.07
In my work I promote sustainable solutions via structural social work, e.g., write about issues related to the environment. (<i>n</i> = 444)	1.5	1	0.82
The response variable: the mean of previous variables, when at least five applicable (<i>n</i> = 490)	2.5		0.71

if respondents feel they can impact their work tasks to make them more environmentally friendly, 41.3% (*n* = 224) agreed with the claim. The rest either disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with the claim ($M = 3.1$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.13$).

In addition, the questionnaire included two claims capturing respondents' views on clients' interest in incorporating the natural environment into their services. The claim that clients are willing to make ecological solutions were somewhat or fully agreed with by 43.5% (*n* = 205), as the rest neither agreed nor disagreed or disagreed with the claim ($M = 3.1$, $Mdn = 3$, $SD = 1.04$). Seventy-one respondents replied that the claim is not applicable in their work and are not included in these statistics. A majority, 53.2% (*n* = 244) somewhat or fully agreed that

clients are interested in nature-facilitated or animal-facilitated services ($M = 3.5$, $Mdn = 4$, $SD = 1.00$). Eighty-three respondents replied that the claim is not applicable in their work. Therefore, according to social welfare professionals, around half of the clients were interested in nature- and animal-facilitated services, and slightly fewer were willing to make ecological solutions.

In summary, less than half of the respondents agreed there was interest in ecosocial work in their organization or that they could impact their work tasks to promote their environmental friendliness. Less than a third agreed there was management support or possibilities, for example, the resources, to develop ecosocial work practice. According to social welfare professionals, clients were somewhat interested in incorporating the environment

into their services. However, incorporating the natural environment into practice does not necessarily meet the varying needs of social work clients.

Factors associated with ecosocial work practice

The analysis revealed statistically significant differences in the frequency of ecosocial work practices between groups when looking at different background factors and claims. The significant background factors were gender, whether one has a bachelor's or a master's degree, and whether one works in the public, private, or third sector. The frequency of ecosocial practices varied significantly between groups regarding knowledge, support for ecosocial work in the work organization, client interest, and the personal importance of the natural environment and taking action to protect it.

Women ($M = 2.54$) applied ecosocial work practices slightly more often than men ($M = 2.35$), but the difference was small. Educational background also indicated differences. Those whose highest degree was a bachelor's degree ($M = 2.69$) applied ecosocial work slightly more often than those with some other degree ($M = 2.25$). On the contrary, those with a master's degree in social work ($M = 2.13$) practised ecosocial work more rarely than those with some other qualification ($M = 2.69$). Furthermore, there were differences between social welfare professionals working in different sectors: those working in the private sector ($M = 2.94$) or third sector ($M = 2.76$) applied ecosocial work practices more often than professionals employed in the public sector ($M = 2.37$).

The frequency of ecosocial work varied significantly between groups also regarding knowledge. Those who felt they knew how to consider the natural environment in social work ($M = 2.80$) applied ecosocial work more often than those who did not feel they had this knowledge ($M = 2.24$). Those who agreed there was enough information in their organization on environmental problems ($M = 2.80$) scored higher than those who disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with this ($M = 2.38$).

Regarding support for developing ecosocial practice at work, those who agreed there was interest in ecosocial work in their organization ($M = 2.78$) conducted ecosocial work practices more often than those who disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with this ($M = 2.34$). The same applied for those who agreed there was management support for developing ecosocial work ($M = 2.92$) in comparison to those who did not straightforwardly agree with this ($M = 2.37$). Those who agreed that in their organization there were possibilities, for example, resources, for developing ecosocial work ($M = 3.06$)

applied it more often than their counterparts ($M = 2.38$). Furthermore, those who agreed they could impact their work tasks to make them more environmentally friendly ($M = 2.79$) practised ecosocial work more often than those who disagreed or neither agreed nor disagreed with this ($M = 2.34$). Those who felt that clients were willing to make ecological solutions ($M = 2.72$) applied ecosocial work more often than those who did not ($M = 2.42$). Similarly, those who perceived that clients were interested in nature- and animal-facilitated services ($M = 2.74$) practised ecosocial work more often than their counterparts ($M = 2.32$).

In addition, those who felt it was highly important to address environmental issues ($M = 2.56$) applied ecosocial practices slightly more often than those who considered this perhaps important, though to a lesser extent ($M = 2.30$). It is important to recognize that the differences between the groups were small, and altogether, ecosocial practices were applied quite rarely. The connected p values are presented in Table 3.

TABLE 3 Significance of differences in group means regarding the frequency of ecosocial practices.

Variable	Mann-Whitney p	Kruskal-Wallis p
Gender	0.046*	
Age		0.521
Bachelor's degree in social services	<0.001**	
Master's degree in social work	<0.001**	
Years of working in social welfare		0.765
Type of organization		<0.001**
Knowledge on how to consider the environment at work	<0.001**	
Information on environmental issues in the organization	<0.001**	
Interest in ecosocial work in the organization	<0.001**	
Management's support for developing ecosocial work practices	<0.001**	
Possibilities, e.g., resources, to develop ecosocial work practices	<0.001**	
Ability to impact work tasks	<0.001**	
Clients' interest in ecological solutions	<0.001**	
Clients' interest in nature- or animal-facilitated work	<0.001**	
Personal importance of the natural environment and taking action	0.011*	

Note: Statistically significant variables are marked with * ($p < 0.05$) or ** ($p < 0.001$).

The variables that proved significant in the comparison of group means were further entered in regression analysis to identify those that best explain the frequency of applying ecosocial work. The variables entered were the following: gender; educational background; whether the respondent works in the public, private or third sector; the personal importance of environmental issues and taking action; variables regarding support and resources for ecosocial work in the participant's workplace; client perspectives; and variables regarding knowledge on environmental issues and integrating the environment into social work. The regression analysis resulted in a model depicting a combination of factors that best predict applying ecosocial practices more often than rarely.

In the logistic analysis, the odds ratio (*OR*) indicates how many times higher or lower the odds of conducting ecosocial work at least occasionally are, compared to the first category of each variable (the reference category

with *OR* 1). The best explanatory variables and their odds ratios with 95% confidence intervals are presented in Table 4.

The odds of professionals who were qualified social workers to conduct ecosocial work practices more often than rarely were about three times lower (*OR* = 0.333) than were the odds of those without social workers' qualification. Social welfare professionals employed in private companies odds to apply ecosocial work practices more often than rarely were about three times higher (*OR* = 3.195), in comparison with social welfare professionals working in the municipal or state organizations or social and health care districts.

Knowledge was associated with the frequency of applying ecosocial work practices. Social welfare professionals who implied that they know how to consider the wellbeing of the natural environment in social work had about 2.5 times higher odds (*OR* = 2.479) to apply

TABLE 4 The explanatory variables associated with applying ecosocial work practices.

Explanatory variable	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>OR</i>	95% CI
Gender (female)			1	
Gender (male)	−1.316	0.027	0.268	0.084–0.858
Public sector		0.004	1	
Private sector	1.161	<0.001	3.195	1.600–6.380
Third sector	0.534	0.211	1.706	0.738–3.942
Qualified social worker (no)			1	
Qualified social worker (yes)	−1.101	<0.001	0.333	0.184–0.601
Management's support for developing ecosocial practice (no)			1	
Management's support for developing ecosocial practice (yes)	1.040	<0.001	2.828	1.545–5.177
Personal importance (<4.5, less than very high)			1	
Personal importance (>4.5, very high)	1.024	0.029	2.785	1.114–6.965
Clients' interest in nature- or animal-facilitated work (no)			1	
Clients' interest in nature- or animal-facilitated work (yes)	0.982	<0.001	2.669	1.599–4.454
Information on environmental issues in the work community (no)			1	
Information on environmental issues in the work community (yes)	0.974	<0.001	2.649	1.524–4.603
Knowledge on considering the environment in social work (no)			1	
Knowledge on considering the environment in social work (yes)	0.908	<0.001	2.479	1.493–4.114
Ability to impact own work tasks (no)			1	
Ability to impact own work tasks (yes)	0.670	0.014	1.954	1.148–3.327

Note: $R^2 = 0.357$ (Cox and Snell) and 0.476 (Nagelkerke); Hosmer and Lemeshow test 0.282.

ecosocial work more often than rarely, compared to those not possessing this knowledge. Likewise, if social welfare professionals perceived there was enough information in their organization to operate in an environmentally friendly way, they had 2.6 times higher odds ($OR = 2.649$) of applying ecosocial work practices more often than rarely.

Support in the organization was also important. If social work professionals perceived there was management support for developing ecosocial work ($OR = 2.828$), and if they agreed they could impact their work tasks to make them more environmentally friendly ($OR = 1.954$), these increased the odds of applying ecosocial practices. Furthermore, clients' interest mattered. If social welfare professionals perceived that clients were interested in nature- and animal-facilitated services, they had more than two times higher odds ($OR = 2.669$) to take up ecosocial work practices more often than rarely, compared to those who did not straightforwardly agree with this.

Male practitioners' odds to conduct ecosocial work practices more often than rarely were more than three times lower ($OR = 0.268$) than their female counterparts. However, the number of male respondents was low, and thus this should be considered with caution. Finally, the personal importance of the natural environment and addressing environmental issues also made a difference. Even though the sample was likely to consist of respondents who value the environment, those who considered the environment and acting on environmental issues highly important had a nearly three times higher odds ratio ($OR = 2.785$) to apply ecosocial work practices more often than rarely, in comparison with those who held the environment to be slightly less important.

The model succeeded in categorizing 79.4% of cases. The Hosmer-Lemeshow test value ($p = 0.282$) indicated that the model was sufficiently in accordance with the data used. The model was able to capture 35%–47% of the variance in the response variable, indicating that the model should be further developed: some aspects or factors associated with the frequency of ecosocial work practices remained unrecognized.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

In summary, the ecosocial work practices presented in this study were conducted overall quite rarely in Finnish social work. The social welfare professionals occasionally talked with their clients about social sustainability and the significance of nature or animals in their lives, and integrated the natural environment, such as the outdoors, in their work with clients. Structural or community approaches were rarely applied. Social welfare professionals

for whom all the following categories apply were found to conduct ecosocial work practices more often or, rather, less rarely: female, held a bachelor's degree in social services, worked in the private sector, considered acting on environmental issues highly important and possessed the necessary knowledge on how to consider the natural environment in social work, and felt that clients were interested in nature- and animal-facilitated services, and were able to reshape their work to be more environmentally friendly, and received support from their management.

The findings of this study support the implications of previous studies: a community approach has been scarce in Finland (Roivainen, 2009), and, likewise, the ecosocial approach remains rather unknown (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021). When exploring factors that enable or hinder applying the ecosocial approach in social work, this study supports the conclusions of previous qualitative studies that personal interest, knowledge, organizations and organizational practices, and client attitudes play an important role in ecosocial work (Boetto et al., 2020; Boetto et al., 2022).

There were also two surprising results. The first of them was that professionals with the most education tend to be less eager to apply ecosocial practices. Is the reason that their work is typically very busy and deeply focused on the immediate needs of the clients? Or is it that licensed social workers with a master's degree have more administrative tasks? This survey in itself gives no direct answers. The second surprising result was that social work professionals working in the private sector tend to apply an ecosocial perspective more often than those working in public organizations. Is it that there is more freedom in the private sector and the practices are not so strictly governed there? Also, it might be that the environmentally friendly attitude of a company might be a good element when advertising the company. Again, the exact answer remains unknown. Both surprising results must be investigated more.

This study has some policy implications. Increasing awareness of the ecosocial approach enables practitioners to identify opportunities to apply it in their own work (Boetto et al., 2022). Even though ecosocial work is not yet widely known in Finnish social work (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021), about a half of the survey respondents stated they know how to take the wellbeing of the environment into account in their work. Nevertheless, approximately only one in three stated that there is enough information in their organization to enable operating in an environmentally friendly way. To provide opportunities for ecosocial work, knowledge on ecosocial work and information on environmental issues and their social consequences could be provided through the social work education required for all qualified social welfare

professionals. Furthermore, the organizations where social welfare professionals work should also be better informed of environmental issues affecting human well-being and the ecosocial approach in social work. A clearer definition of and a common understanding of the ecosocial approach and tools could encourage integrating it into social work practice (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017, p. 82).

This study implies that not only knowledge, but also other enabling and hindering factors play a role in whether the ecosocial approach is endorsed in social work practice. The personal importance of the natural environment might play a significant role in embracing such an approach. Nevertheless, more support from the social work organizations is needed to apply the approach in practice. Taking up environmentally friendly practices should be examined as a common endeavor in social work organizations and workplaces, not only as the responsibility of individuals, be they social welfare professionals or service users.

The findings of this study suggest that the ecosocial approach is not prominent in social work in Finland. Does this mean that the quest for sustainability remains in a minor role in social work discussions and practice in Finnish social work? For social work to really promote sustainability, all its dimensions—social, environmental, and economic—need to be addressed (Peeters, 2017, pp. 147–148). It would be easy to see only the social dimension of sustainability as a social work realm. The interconnections between human wellbeing and the wellbeing of the natural environment could be discussed more so as to examine the arguments for taking into account the wellbeing of the natural environment as well. Furthermore, injustices related to the natural environment and environmental issues should be explored, and the possibility of advocacy should be recognized in social work in Finland. Again, the natural environment and environmental issues should be perceived not only as a personal interest but as a mutual social work interest.

This study also results in suggestions for further research. Instead of an educational degree, the actual work tasks that professionals with different educational backgrounds have are more likely to affect their ability to apply ecosocial work practices. The differences between fields and positions within the realm of social work and social welfare should be studied further in relation to the ecosocial approach in social work practice. Different clientele in different contexts demand different kinds of approaches and interventions, preferably backed up by an examination of their effectiveness (Marlow & van Rooyen, 2001, p. 252). However, ecosocial work practices are one type of tool among others that social welfare professionals can use. Incorporating the natural environment into social work does not necessarily meet the individual needs and

distinct situations of social work clients. Social work as a research object and as a work context is constantly evolving and encompasses a wide range of fields, tasks, and organizations. These considerations notwithstanding, this study sheds light on the present state of the ecosocial approach in Finnish social work. It provides opportunities to reflect on the relationship between social work, the natural environment, and the quest for sustainability.

Limitations of the study

For all its limitations, this is the first extensive set of data collected among Finnish social welfare professionals on the ecosocial approach in Finnish social work. Despite reminders, the response rate was low (4.5%), and it is reasonable to assume that the survey was answered primarily by social welfare professionals interested in the topic. 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 in Finland. Furthermore, a fair number of respondents replied “neither agree nor disagree” or “not applicable in my work” to many claims. The social welfare professionals who participated in the study represented a variety of different organizations, professional positions, and work tasks, and not all worked with social work clients. This challenged the suitability of some claims for every possible participant.

As the ecosocial approach is not yet widely known in Finnish social work (Ranta-Tyrkkö & Närhi, 2021), the survey explored the frequency of a sample of practices. Therefore, the study provides only partial insight on ecosocial work practices in Finnish social work. Examining the frequency of practices does not reveal to what extent the transformative ecosocial approach requiring a new value base in social work has been adopted among social welfare professionals in Finland. Examining social work phenomena, such as ecosocial work, through the perceptions of professionals provides an indirect view: when attempting to examine the frequencies of practice and organizational attributes, we actually reveal the perceptions of these.

When exploring what enables or hinders the application of the ecosocial approach in social work, the goodness of the model produced depends on if the right variables have been included in the model in the first place. There might be some relevant factors not surveyed in this study. The model presented in this article is an opening to explore the factors associated with ecosocial work. Further research is needed to explore the variety of ways the ecosocial approach is applied in social work as well as to overcome the factors affecting this practice.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no potential conflicts of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT


Research data are not shared due to dissertation in progress.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The chair and secretary of the Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä evaluated that this project does not require a statement from the committee because none of the six official criteria for mandatory statement is fulfilled. For example, there was no deviation from the principle of informed consent, risk of mental harm to participants, or threat to their safety.

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