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**Author(s):** Närhi, Kati

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## Chapter 20

### The Changing Understandings of the ‘Person in Environment’ in Organizing Public Social Work Practice

*Kati Närhi*

#### **Introduction**

The constellation of the ‘person in environment’ can be claimed to form one of the most important principles in social work practice and theory. It has been argued that the framework of the ‘person in environment’ has been applied primarily to intrapersonal and social interactions, and not enough attention has been paid to professional functions related to policy practice and to interactions with the ‘built’, physical and natural environment. (Rogge and Cox 2002, Gray et.al. 2012, Kemp 2011, Molyneux 2010, Zapf 2010, Närhi and Matthies 2001, 2016.) This article focuses on social workers’ understanding of the relationship between the environment and human wellbeing and how institutional strategies of social work and organizing social work practices have shaped practices and practitioners’ understandings of the ‘person in environment’.

Organizing public social work practices in Finland, and in this case particularly in the city of Jyväskylä, have been reformed from the community based social work model into specialized and centralized models of practice.

Community based social work is understood to refer to work that was done primarily at municipal social offices in residential areas in Finland during 1985–2000 (Roivainen 2008). Social workers were seen as generalists, and they were in charge of many kinds of social issues in the geographical areas they were working. This took place during in the 1980s and the 1990s in Finland. The main tasks of community

based social workers were counselling, welfare benefit work and child protection work. Community work was also seen as part of the tasks at that time.

From the beginning of the 2000s, many social work organizations in Finland were divided into two specialized groups of social work: social work with adults, including welfare benefit and rehabilitation work, and social work with children. The latter group works with families with children, the former with adults who do not have children. Around 2005, especially in the bigger cities, the tendency towards the specialization of expertise was strengthened by the so-called centralized model of social work. It meant that specialized offices from local circumstances were centralized physically in the city centres (Roivainen 2008.)

The article analyses how the relationship between human wellbeing and the living environment is understood and changed from the practitioners' point of view during different models of organizing public social work practices in one municipality in Finland. Further, the article asks how organizing social work practice may prohibit and advance social workers' input on the ecosocial transition of society (see Matthies in Chapter 2 for the ecosocial transition of society).

This research is based on the hypothesis that the relationship between the local living environment and human wellbeing is a basic principle in social work thinking and therefore a relevant factor in social work practice and theory. The article argues that a broad understanding of the 'person in environment' gives the perspective and tools for a practitioner to practice a kind of sustainable social work that supports the ecosocial transition of society studied in this book.

### **The Idea of the 'Person in Environment'**

The 'person in environment' perspective views the relationship between humans and

their environment as a dynamic, interactive system in which each part simultaneously affects and is affected by the other (Weiss-Gal 2008, Kemp 2011, Rogge and Cox 2002). The *object* of social work is then not human behaviour nor their environment but rather possible dysfunctions or recourses in that relationship (Payne 2005).

The dual focus of the 'person in environment' has shifted between a focus on individual or psychological theory and a focus on environmental or sociological theory. This dual focus also reflects the dichotomization of social work into micro and macro practices, which can be traced back to the thinking of Jane Addams and Mary Richmond. Both were pioneers of social work who emphasized the importance of environment on human wellbeing. Mary Richmond focused on the individual's holistic social environment and social situation in the sense of social interaction. Jane Addams understood environment as an urban environment that includes not only social environment but also physical and built environment. (Närhi and Matthies 2016.) However, her ecological approach and her conception of urban ecology differed from the general view of social ecology within the Chicago School (see Deegan 1998), which regarded urban development as analogical to biological development processes. Addams argued that the weaknesses of certain groups are not due to 'biological characteristics' but are instead the result of certain social circumstances. Therefore, people should be described and understood within the contexts of their own environments (Addams 1910, Staub-Bernasconi 1989: 287, Närhi and Matthies 2016.)

Since then discussions on the 'person in environment' have developed, and environmental awareness has deepened the discussions. Although the natural sciences were given greater emphasis during the 1950s and 1960s, *new* forms of environmental consciousness developed during this period (for example Coates 2003, Ungar 2002). In

addition, the emphasis on the natural sciences played an important role in social work taking the direction of systems theoretical thinking (see for example Payne 1994, Payne 2005).

Since the 1970s, ecological social work has taken two different theoretical directions (Närhi and Matthies 2001), which are still used for categorization in the current literature of ecological social work (Gray et al. 2012, Coates and Gray 2012, Peeters 2012a, b, Molyneux 2010). They are the systems theoretical and ecocritical approaches (Närhi and Matthies 2001, 2016). In both traditions the relationship between humans and the environment is regarded as interactive. The systems theory approach understands the person as a part of a holistic system, including micro- meso- and macro-systems. The ecocritical approach views the individual as a part of nature, which, in turn, is itself a part of the holistic system of the planet. In this sense, the traditions share the same perspective, and their main differences lie in the emphasis that each puts on the concept of the environment. In the ecocritical approach the environmental crisis not only concerns nature and the environment but also encompasses human beings and their relationships, values and cultural assumptions. Systemic theorists do not take a stand on environmental issues. They rather see them simply as disturbing factors in the system and do not criticize modern society, which produces these disturbances (Närhi 2004, Närhi and Matthies 2001, 2016.)

In the current discussions, ecocritical tradition has strengthened, and at the global level there are different theoretical concepts and approaches demonstrating the growing environmental thinking in social work. All of the approaches challenge mainstream social work to broaden its focus and share the critical notion of humans

being a part of nature. (Närhi and Matthies 2016.) This deepens the idea of the ‘person in environment’ in social work from a different perspective than previously.

### **Context of Social Work in Finland**

In Finland social workers are academically trained: they have a master’s degree that combines the professional training of social work and researcher education in social science. Social work has been closely bound up with the public social welfare service system and especially with social welfare work at the local level. The Finnish welfare model has traditionally been based on a system in which municipalities are responsible for the local welfare services of citizens (for example Kananoja et al. 2008).

Still, Finland has never been a Scandinavian welfare state in its purest form. According to Heiskala (2006: 14–42), from the 1990s onwards Finland could be described as being a work performance oriented Schumpeterian competition state where social and educational policy are understood as an investment for future economic growth. However, since about 2005 Finland has been a part of the global and European downturn in the economy and has seen a considerable reduction in its gross national product. Since then, the emphasis in public policies has changed from growth and social investments to an era of austerity. Hence, public discussions and activities have focused on economic growth, costs and their effect on productivity (Julkunen 2008).

The impacts of the so-called neoliberal shift can be seen in the cutting down of the universal principle of a welfare state in Finland. The change of direction has been seen in social work in the form of increased managerialism and practices of New Public Management (NPM) in which economic efficiency has been the central starting point in guiding social work practices. Neoliberal thinking has changed the understanding of the

user-practitioner relationship; it sees it as being adversarial because the practitioner has to fulfil not only the demands of economic efficiency but also those of user-centred time management. (Juhila 2006, Julkunen 2008.) The reform of social work from been a practice based on a community based generalistic model to one based on a specialized and centralized model can be seen as part of this political shift.

### **Data and Methods**

The research is based on the qualitative paradigm and a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006) of social workers' group interviews. The data consist of three different data strands. The first study (1995–2000) focuses on ecosocial social work practice constructed by community based social workers and is based on my dissertation analysis (Närhi 2004). The data is grounded on a monthly discussion forum of social workers that lasted about two hours each time. Using the methods of open conversation and shared knowledge formation, my purpose was to find out how the social workers understood the relationship between the living environment and human welfare in the context of spatial marginalization (ibid.). During 1995–2000, some 20 social workers took part in the research process.

The second group interview's data (2006) focuses on studying the specialized models of social work practice. In the data, four social workers who were engaged in a research process already during the first data recalled the incidents, changes and differences in community based and specialized social work practices as they remembered them. We met three times and each discussion lasted about two-three hours. The starting point in remembering is that individual experiences are seen to reflect the general situation in society. By reminiscing in the group, events are being constructed and finally a shared view of situations is discussed.

The third group interview (2015) concentrates on analyzing the current centralized model of organizing social work practice. I group interviewed six social workers who work with adults, and the interview took two hours. All the data in all three research projects has been collected from social workers in the city of Jyväskylä, Finland, and it has been recorded and transcribed for analysis. Thematic analysis was done by using and mixing the data from different decades. In the following analysis, the quotations of social workers are numbered and marked with the year they were collected in order to follow the idea of transparency in the analysis.

### **Understanding the ‘Person in Environment’ in the Community Based Model of Social Work**

In Finland, and in Jyväskylä in particular, community based social work means generalist work that practitioners did at the municipal social offices in residential areas during 1985–2000. A holistic and generalist orientation, a preventive perspective and a broad understanding of wellbeing were evident factors in social work practice at that time. Community based social work was grounded on the idea that in order to perform quality social work it has to be done within local communities with residents, service users and other actors that know the local community and living environment. A social worker from the 2006 interview makes a summary about the idea as follows:

Services were community based. It was a big trend and an idea about local democracy to serve citizens close to their living environment. There was also a strong ideology that besides local services there should be also a strong sense of community in the services.  
(sw1, 2006)

Social workers argued that the management of social work services strongly supported the idea and the practices grounded on community based work. On the other hand, it seemed to be an ideology that was easy to understand and adapt in social work.



The regional collaboration between different actors was the key factor in social work at that time:

The idea that this is a good way to work came from the top of the social welfare service administration. They even made research about it, and the results looked positive when we shifted to the community based model. Somehow it was an ideology that was very easy to accept and understand in social work. I was thinking about the goals we had in our work at that time. In some community based collaboration teams they promoted a pedestrian crossing on a crossroad where children walked to school. The other goal was, for instance, to support residents to act together and create a sense of community in council housing where many of our clients lived. (sw2, 2006)

The 'person in environment' relationship at that time focused on both the social and physical environment. Locality and the problems and recourses of the residential area were seen as important factors in human wellbeing. The aim of the community based work was a holistic understanding of the 'person in environment'. An important factor was to create and keep up a sense of community in the area:

We thought that if we acted together in collaboration we could help and support the people who live in the area and we could also improve the living environment and inform policy makers what the strengths and weaknesses are in each area. It included a holistic perspective on the living environment, and I do believe that by acting together when we know the local environment, we as social workers are able to help the client in a different and more holistic way than by not knowing in which local environment she lives and with whom she interacts there. (sw3, 2006)

In my dissertation analysis (Närhi 2004), which included group interviews from community based social workers during 1995–2000, I explained that the relationship between the environment and human wellbeing appeared to the social workers at that time as a highly complex one in which it was difficult to establish the specific causalities between different elements.

The social workers' view was based on the idea that especially vulnerable people have close relationship with local living conditions. During their group discussions the social workers underlined the importance of the local living environment, because they saw that certain groups of people were dependent both temporally and spatially on their local living environment. The social workers recognized that for some groups of people, such as families with children, older people, disabled or underprivileged groups and the long-term unemployed or poor people, the local living environment means more than it does for those who are more mobile and wealthy. Scarce resources were seen to limit possibilities for everyday mobility and moving out of the residential area. Then again, it was understood that social relations, for instance, are no longer necessarily confined to local living environments. (Närhi 2002, 2004.)

Through their shared conversations, the social workers redefined what they regarded as the key elements of a sustainable living environment.

**[insert Figure 20.1 here]**

### **FIGURE 20.1 Social Workers' Logic in Developing a Sustainable Living Environment**

As illustrated in Figure 20.1, the diversity of community structures and the population structure was considered to make possible a sense of community, stability in the area, social control and tolerance of difference in the area. These criteria are closely interwoven with one another and have multiple interdependencies and causalities that are often very difficult to analyse. These interdependencies, together with the local living conditions in residential areas and city planning, housing policies, economic transformations and local social policy, were considered to have an impact on whether

or not a sustainable living environment is created. In other words, they argued that experienced welfare in residential areas may depend on such factors as the level of rents, the standard of equipment in flats, the size of flats available, processes of housing policies, the lack of economic resources or public spaces and the lack of power and visions in the area. (Närhi 2002, 2004.)

The social workers understood that it is important for them to try to influence both the living environments directly and the structures and practices that define the quality of living environments.

### **Understanding the ‘Person in Environment’ in the Specialized Model of Social Work**

The specialized model of social work practice which has been present in Finland more or less since the beginning of the 2000s meant that social work was mainly divided into social work with adults and social work with children. The aim was to bring quality and specialized expertise to community based social work offices. At the same time, based on the social workers’ group discussions, the understanding of community based social work shifted towards a narrower perspective and understanding of the role of social work in society. Meanwhile, the emphasis shifted from the holistic living environment perspective to the specific questions of specialization.

Social workers in the 2006 interview told that specialization modifies the understanding of the ‘person in environment’. Things are seen from the system’s perspective, not from the holistic view of a client. In the following, a social worker makes a summary about the differences between the basic ideas of community based and specialized models:

The community based model was based on the idea that we need to unite various services, because we thought that by working together we could observe, recognize and understand better a holistic perspective. But look what has happened since that? Services have been cut from the local environments and put into bigger units. A holistic perspective has disappeared. This development is an opposite reaction to a community based model. (sw4, 2006)

Due to the organization of the specialized model, the sizes of residential areas that social workers' were responsible for enlarged. Therefore, practitioners were unable to get knowledge from the living area as well as before, and the aims of the work changed. The next discussion describes this phenomenon:

The physical areas of communities we are in charge of have increased since the specialisation model took place. You can know your working area geographically but the holistic knowledge of what it is like to live in the area doesn't come through service user groups anymore. We have lost the holistic overall knowledge about the living area. (sw2, 2006)

That's right. In the specialisation model, the knowledge of child welfare is concentrated on family ideology and family systems and the child's situation and that kind of substance.

When the insight is built in accordance with what you do, the insight and your perspective just changes. (sw1, 2006)

At that time emphasis on the management level was shifted on the grounds of cost efficiency and specialization of expertise. Social workers told that the specialization process happened in two cycles. The first one was initiated by the practitioners who wanted to develop their work, and the second, a more dramatic one, happened from the top down without consultation with the workers themselves:

The change was said to be due to the deepening of specialized expertise, but the real reason for the shift was because of the economic issues in the city. (sw2, 2006)

Yes. It was done because they wanted to decrease office work spaces and to cut the costs and tighten the control of management and centralize leadership. All was done with the aim of tightening the budget. (sw1, 2006)

Due to cost efficiency and the weakening recourses of social work services, practitioners told that they did not have time to create partnerships outside of their specialized system. Based on the data, it seems that the task of social work in public social offices was to not become involved in developing and influencing local living areas and communities as had been the case before. A social worker made the following summary about the situation:

After the shift from a community based model to a specialized model, a lot of responsibility has been placed on the third sector. It now has to do a lot of work that had previously been done by public social work in the living areas. The public sector at the municipality seems to have certain legal tasks, actually quite narrow responsibilities, and there are also these other collaborators and actors who work in the living areas. Currently, it is only the economic perspective that measures human wellbeing in the public services. (sw3, 2006)

Practitioners also saw the need to specialize their expertise but with a different model to maintain the community based idea of working in residential areas and a holistic thinking in specialization. This is what they called small-scale thinking:

I think that an ideal model would be a rather small local living environment and the work would be done there as teams. One practitioner should not have to handle everything from birth to death with the clients, but there could be a common working area, and specialized practitioners could work as teams so that we could better understand the community's wellbeing from various different perspectives. (sw3, 2006)

## **Understanding the 'Person in Environment' in the Centralized Model of Social Work**

The centralized model of social work practice means work that is divided between the

offices of social work with adults and social work with children. Usually, both of these specialized offices are located in different buildings in the city centre. In general, this happened in Finland from the mid-2000s onwards. The third data set of this article is focused on social work with adults. I group interviewed six social workers who work with adults in the centralized social work office in the city centre of Jyväskylä.

Interviewed social workers told that the ‘person in environment’ perspective functions as a background orientation in their work. Their knowledge gained from the relationship between human wellbeing and local living environment, in which the social and physical environment are seen to be interwoven, is similar to that of the group interviews in my first data set during the 1990s:

Our clients’ life includes various living environments, and I see that the social and physical environment are tightly interwoven in our clients’ wellbeing. I don’t make an analysis of a person’s situation based solely on the physical environment. Statistically, for instance, one can see that in some areas there are more single mothers and unemployed. I use the information more as background information on what is ‘normal’ in certain areas.  
(sw1, 2015)

Identical to the previous interviews, social workers told that the importance of the local living environment is related to a person’s age and life situation. Usually, for older people, the local environment is more meaningful than for younger people that move from one residential area to another more often. Also, their communities are nowadays on the internet and in social media and not in the physical environments in local areas. Still, social workers argued that the living environment has either a positive or negative influence on a person. In contrast to the data in the 1990s, there is an emphasis on the individuality of a client’s situation:

There is no univocal definition of living environment. It's a world in which an individual lives and is always an individual thing. Each client has a different situation, but one can see two extremes in their opinions. The others have clear views on certain living areas, which is that everybody there is a drug abuser. Because the living area is so restless one has to move from the area. One can't study or concentrate on anything there. So, the instant living environment can have a massive negative impact on a person. (sw2, 2015)

This is true. And on the other hand, others say that their flat and the living environment are very important for them. They have lived a long time in the area and have tight roots there. So for some clients the living environment makes a positive difference to their wellbeing. (sw3, 2015)

Based on the social workers' views, it can be argued that the idea of a community based model that includes holistic thinking and an understanding that the local living environment is important for all residents' wellbeing, has to some degree shifted to a work orientation model that looks at the idea of the 'person in environment' through the eyes of an individual's situation and not at the level of communities.

Social workers discussed a lot about their specialized expertise in the centralized model of practice. They work with people who live in marginal positions and have several challenges in their life which go beyond the sectors of the public services. In this sense, the models of specialization and the centralization of practice are not seen as being sensible from the client's perspective. The social workers' opinion is that the clients' situations diverge too much in the service system and nobody takes holistic responsibility, for instance, for a family's wellbeing. Next, two social workers analyse their clients' positions in the specialized service system:

Just how specialized are we actually? We work with people in various marginal positions. Their common problem is that they can't get specialized services like social work with the handicapped or child welfare services. Their situation is not bad enough. They are stuck

with us. For instance, child welfare services send us an adult from a family who is a client of child welfare services and ask us to deal with the client's unemployment issues. I must say that is not a holistic perspective from the users' position. (sw4, 2015)

Yes, I agree. In this centralized model everybody is doing one's specialized task, which is the size of a stamp. Also, in our specialized service system we sometimes totally forget to think about the kind of living environment in which our clients are living. (sw2, 2015)

Organizing social work practice based on a specialized and centralized system has led to the situation that social workers have difficulties in knowing the local physical and social environment and living areas in which they work. They receive the important information about the communities from other practitioners working in the living areas. For instance, general health centres are still mainly community based services:

Our working areas are not geographically compact units. I am responsible for three different living areas, and it's very difficult to be able to know all areas and services there. (sw2, 2015)

I know. Information about the areas and communities drips down from various partners in the area. In particular, personal relations with other workers from the area are very important. For instance, it's easier to get your client through to the health services if you know practitioners there. (sw4, 2015)

The management of social welfare services has a strong impact on work done in the social offices. According to social workers, expectations about what is important in social work at the management level, has had an influence on the way work is performed and on the orientation of their work. Currently, based on the interview in 2015, the management focuses on cost efficiency and user perspective in its strategy:

For several years we had a feeling that the management didn't appreciate house calls at all because the emphasis in the statistics was on the number of clients we met. A lot of focus was put on how we use our working time. There was a wish that we should meet as many



clients as possible, and if you did a house call in the residential area, you couldn't see so many clients in a day. It was a question of what was valued in social work practice. (sw5, 2015)

Yes, that's right. But for around a year now the management has encouraged us to be more user-oriented and to visit the residential areas, do house calls and create a sense of community with clients. (sw3, 2015)

The interviewed social workers think that the change in strategy is connected to changes at the national level due to new social welfare legislation (2015): this strategy has social workers focus on helping especially vulnerable groups, on developing social rehabilitation and on practicing structural social work. The other big organizational change will shift welfare benefit work from municipal social offices to the National Social Insurance Institution of Finland (Kela). The impacts of the transformations are not yet apparent:

For a year now we have been actively encouraged to experiment and test new ways of doing our work, and we have had more freedom to develop our work. The reason for this has especially been the shift of welfare benefit work to Kela which will release resources for other types of work in social offices. But we don't yet know how much and for what kind of work. (sw1, 2015)

A social worker from the 2006 interview makes a summary about the organizational changes that she has experienced during her working career. It seems that the changes to how social work practices have been organized might be the only permanent thing when practicing social work:

I think that trends might have gone full circle during my 30 year career in social work because first I was a child welfare worker; you know specialized social work was the trend for a long time during the 1970s and early 1980s. Then came community based work, and after a while it fell apart. I am just wondering how long it will take for the emphasis to again be on the community based orientation. (sw3, 2015)

## **The Main Results**

### *Understanding of the 'Person in Environment'*

The results of earlier studies (for example, Rogge and Cox 2001, Weiss-Gal 2008, Brobst 2013, Kemp 2011) concerning the understanding of the 'person in environment' in social work seem to come to a similar conclusion as this chapter. Also, in my analysis, the environment was understood by social workers in broad and non-specific ways. In Brobst's (2013: 11–14) study, the practitioners identified three core understandings of the 'person in environment': '1. Thinking about the person in context brings a fuller, deeper understanding, 2. The environment can be the cause of the problem and 3. Changing the environment can be part of the intervention.' Social workers in my data verified all the findings. They also felt strongly that the environment 'mattered', but exactly how it mattered was unclear (ibid.).

Brobst (2013: 11) argues that environment, being an abstract concept, might be too vague to be useful for explanation in practice. In her study, while social workers agreed that a human needs to be seen in their full context, it was done for the sake of greater understanding, not as a guide to practice. Also, in Weiss-Gal's study (2008), the 'person in environment' approach was strongly reflected in practitioners' views of the goals and activities of the profession, but it was not evident in their work.

My earlier findings with Matthies (Närhi and Matthies 2001, Närhi 2002, 2004) about the nature of ecological theories (also Meyer 1995, Payne 2005, Brobst 2013) do indeed confirm that the ecosystems perspective does not offer any specific guidelines for facilitating change. Although systems theory helps social workers orient themselves to realize the relationship between human wellbeing and environment in clients' lives,

the abstract nature of the perspective does not give a practitioner concrete tools for interventions.

My analysis from this data supports the above overall observations. In the data, the concept of environment worked as a background orientation for practitioners, not as an explaining element. Social workers in this data made use of systems theoretical thinking when describing their understanding of the 'person in environment'. Although they did find out factors that were relevant in constructing sustainable living conditions, they could not explain the mechanisms of change (see Närhi 2002, 2004).

Based on the data, it seems that from various organizing models of social work practice in the study, the ecosystems thinking has been in focus when reflecting the 'person in environment' framework. Instead, environmental issues in an ecocritical sense have not been at the centre of attention. There are similar studies which have argued that ecocritical orientation has not been the focus of social work's mainstream orientation. For instance, Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) found in their study that although most social workers described environmental issues as personally important, less than half addressed them in practice. Obstacles included workload demands, lack of training, time constraints and insufficient resources. Also Kemp (2011: 1204) has noticed that social workers have been slow to use nature-focused interventions, even though many research studies have pointed to the positive role of nature in wellbeing.

In general, the social workers in my data did not mention the natural environment as an important factor in human wellbeing; although, for instance, a forest as a relaxing place in a residential area for human wellbeing was discussed in the interviews in the first data strand. However, one has to understand the very concrete Finnish relation to nature in which a forest is a self-evident place for relaxation for

Finns regardless of a person's status in society. Still, what is noteworthy is that public social work services have not made much use of this *natural* relation to nature in their interventions during the study.

### *The Models of Organizing Social Work Practice*

During the era of the community based model the idea was that by working where the people are deepens social trust and a sense of community in the area which in turn then has positive impacts on wellbeing in the community. In addition, a local living environment was understood as an object of work itself, not only as a place to work (Roivainen 2016). In this sense one might argue that community based work was grounded on the ideas and work of Jane Addams and the Settlement movement as it has the aim to make a change in the local living conditions of the people with them.

In the models of specialized and centralized practice, social workers are no longer big actors in the living environment and therefore cannot pay systematic attention to the factors in the client's living environment. The community itself is not an object of work but rather an individual and his/her specialized problems. Still, if a client mentions factors affecting his/her living environment, they are evaluated and used as background information in the situation.

Based on the data, it can be argued that the political aim to achieve cost efficiency of services by centralizing social services diminished the idea and practice of community based work in Jyväskylä at the beginning of the 2000s. In addition, there was also a need to specialize social work expertise, but according to the interviewed social workers it should have been carried out in a different way; for instance, by maintaining social offices in the local living environment and by using specialized teamwork as a guarantee of a holistic orientation.

In recent years, which some social science researchers have called the era of New Public Management, the service user centred perspective has once again become a trend in social work and related disciplines. The view now though is different than compared to the understanding in the 1980s and the 1990s. Currently, the main aim is to achieve economic cuts in public welfare budgets. One could even argue that there has been a shift from macro orientation, that is, the tradition of Addams towards a tradition which focuses more on individual diagnosis in social work practice. The societal change and improving local living environment which was an important goal in the community based model has diminished due to the pressures of economic efficiency and individual diagnosis brought about at the management level of the service system (Närhi et.al. 2014).

It appears, based on the different data used in the analysis, that the basic understanding of the 'person in environment', among interviewed social workers, has not changed that much, but over time the emphasis has shifted to a narrower and more individualistic understanding of the 'person in environment'.

It seems that the way social work practice is organized does not as such define practitioners' understanding of the 'person in environment', but it clearly outlines the boundary conditions of practicing social work. In the long run, specialization and centralization, that is, getting away from the concrete living environment, may restrict the thinking in social work practice. The way practice is organized has an impact on the perspectives of how to practice social work and on the factors and knowledge practitioners pay attention to when working with their clients.

## **Conclusion**

Besides focusing on the changes in the understanding of the 'person in environment',

the aim of this article is also to analyse how organizing public social work practice may prohibit and advance social workers' input on the ecosocial transition of society.

The concept of ecosocial transition refers to the efforts of various actors to create sustainable changes in practice. As Matthies has argued in this book, the radical transition approach seeks to practice new types of alternative social work and social policy, which do not demand economic growth as their financial guarantee, and which are based on another type of understanding of wellbeing (see Helne and Hirvilammi in this book). Based on the data, at the moment it seems quite hard to carry out this kind of alternative way of working in public social work offices. The actual transition towards understanding humans as a part of nature would mean a new change of direction not only from the management of social work but also from the practitioners. As all models of practice reflect the era in which they have been organized, we have to analyse the current situation in order to be able to understand the challenges we will face in the future organization of social work practices.

It seems that different models of practice enable and cut off different types of working orientations. Based on the data, the broader the understanding the social worker has of the 'person in environment', the more clearly a practitioner is able to see the connections between the physical environment and human wellbeing. Therefore, in principle, the community based model gives a better starting point for a social worker to work towards ecosocial transition of society. In order to be able to understand the grounds of the ecocritical perspective in one's practice, one should be able to see not only the relationship between humans and environment but also the relationship between culture and nature and what it means in everyday practice. At the moment, social work functions in a narrative which is a part of the economic growth of a welfare

state. The politicization of nature (for example Haila 2003) can be understood in the sense that also social work as an institution is part of the cultural construction processes which promote either human survival or exploitation.

It is a big challenge for social workers to bridge the gap between the mainstream case work and the ecocritical perspective. This means understanding case work more broadly and even going beyond case work towards a more structural and macro level in social work. These kinds of steps were taken during my first research in the 1990s (Matthies and Närhi 1998, Närhi 2004). I claim that a community based model was one of the elements that enabled ecocritical perspective. Since then, the organizational context has not allowed practitioners to concentrate on the issue even though environmental questions have risen into the public discussion.

So, what could be the practical steps of ecosocial transition of local communities? According to Haila (2003), the environment is best understood as a local concept: environment surrounds us. Instead, nature is everywhere, including inside of us. He notes that 'a clean nature' is a diverse realm of coincidence, insecurity and possibilities where at any one moment only a part of the potential possibilities can be fulfilled. For modern societies and modern social work the idea of governing nature and life is a typical one. Therefore, there is reason to ask whether it is possible to govern something uncontrollable, that is, (wild) nature in ourselves. Instead of aiming to govern and control the relationship between human wellbeing and his/her environment, we in social work could settle down to work together with the local 'population' to strive to understand and respect each other and the nature within us. At the same time, we could verify how the nature within and outside of us could act as an empowering element in our lives.

The 'person in environment' perspective that was established in the early days of social work, has lost none of its currency with the emergence of environmental issues. This self-understanding of social work's own action ties in closely with the holistic perspective from systems theory and with the reconstruction or expansion of the 'person in environment' perspective: in the sense that the living environment can be seen as a continuum with the living environment, as an object of social work and perceived as a larger entity extending into nature. The human being is then just part of the holistic system; planet Earth. Therefore, the expansion or extension of the holistic 'person in environment' perspective means seeing different ecological traditions as a continuum including the possibility to integrate them creatively and reflectively. (Närhi 2004.) In general, the question is about developing the theory of the 'person in environment' further in social work. Some studies tell us that it might be worthwhile to use complexity theory (see also Kattilakoski and Rantamäki in Chapter 11), evolution theory or even neuroscience which might provide us with a new understanding of the relationship between people and environments. Social workers should then focus on affecting the *climates* that can sustain the conditions (social, ecological, biological, economic, political) that are essential in human wellbeing. (Green and McDermont 2010.) A broader understanding of the 'person in environment' is needed in order to understand how human and nature are interconnected and what that means in social work practice. Therefore, a global and local ecosocial framework is also needed in social work education, both as a theoretical perspective and as a practical action model (Närhi and Matthies 2016).

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