

**This is an electronic reprint of the original article.  
This reprint *may differ* from the original in pagination and typographic detail.**

**Author(s):** Matthies, Aila-Leena; Närhi, Kati

**Title:** Ecological Theories

**Year:** 2018

**Version:**

**Please cite the original version:**

Matthies, A.-L., & Närhi, K. (2018). Ecological Theories. In N. Thompson, & P. Stepney (Eds.), *Social Work Theory and Methods : The Essentials* (pp. 202-214). Routledge.

All material supplied via JYX is protected by copyright and other intellectual property rights, and duplication or sale of all or part of any of the repository collections is not permitted, except that material may be duplicated by you for your research use or educational purposes in electronic or print form. You must obtain permission for any other use. Electronic or print copies may not be offered, whether for sale or otherwise to anyone who is not an authorised user.

## **Chapter 15: Ecological Theories**

Aila-Leena Matthies and Kati Närhi

### **Introduction**

This chapter discusses theories that help us understand how the environment is an integral part of social work and how social workers can apply this understanding to practice. Since the early historical days of social work, the environment has been embedded in it. First, social work emerged in western societies at the end of the nineteenth century as a response to new social needs arising from the social consequences of the new industrial forms of using natural resources in production and accumulating economic resources. The enormous volume of natural resources used in the economy has influenced also the structure and the relationship between human communities and their environment (Besthorn 2003; Coates 2003; Haila and Dyke, 2006).

For the second, the constellation of the person-in-environment indicates one of the fundamental principles in social work practice and theory. The idea of the person-in-environment argues that the situation of a person cannot be understood and changed by social workers without taking her or his environment into account. It also makes a basic difference to several other professions, such as the medical and nursing professions in health, which may address people rather in person-focused settings detached from their environment. However, social work has applied the

framework of the person-in-environment primarily to intrapersonal and social interactions in a way that mainly addresses the social environment of a person. Not enough attention has been paid to professional functions related to the policy context of practice and to interactions with the built, physical and natural environment (Gray et al., 2012; Kemp 2011).

This dichotomized way of understanding the environment in social work can be traced back to the early years of social work as an emerging practice and discipline, especially in the thinking of Jane Addams (1910) and Mary Richmond (1917, 1922). Both these pioneers of social work emphasized the importance of environment for human wellbeing, but in different senses. Mary Richmond, who developed social casework, focused on a holistic view of an individual's social environment and social situation, in the sense of social interaction. Jane Addams, who developed community work and social research in social work, contextualized social work within entire urban settlements, which included not only the social environment but also the physical and built environment. She also applied political and economic considerations to frame interventions in social work (Närhi and Matthies, 2016a).

Decades after the seminal work of these two important pioneers of social work, the two different theoretical directions of ecological social work can still be identified and remain influential (Närhi and Matthies, 2001; Gray et al., 2012; Peeters, 2012)

- *A systems theoretical approach* in which the main emphasis is on the social environment and holistic thinking (Germain and Gitterman, 1980). For example, recently, Greene and Schriver (2016) gave a comprehensive illustration of an approach that applies ecological systems theory to social work practice. Theories on the interdependence between human behavior and the social environment are applied in various systemic contexts of clients (see also Henriques and Tuckley, 2012).
- *The ecocritical perspective*, which focuses on the impact of the natural and built environment on people's wellbeing and the issues of sustainable development in social work. It transformed the influence of ecological movements and the profound ecological criticism of modern industrial society in social work at large. Dominelli's *Green Social Work* (2012) is one example of this critical ecological thinking in social work at political and global level and having roots in the anti-discriminatory practise. Boetto (2016a) has provided a comprehensive example of a framework that indicates how to integrate the built and natural environment within casework practice. Furthermore, the increasing research and practice of social work, contributing to local and global sustainable development, reflect social work's interconnection with the environment today (Matthies and Närhi, 2016a).

The systems theoretical perspective (the ecosystems approach) highlights the significance of the social environment as a key framework for human behavior, growth and wellbeing. The word "systems" refers to the way of seeing that individuals and groups are in a relationship linked together between different parts of a system. For instance, families, schools, and social communities can be seen as interconnected systems. The environment of these subsystems consists of dynamic relationships containing interdependences, power and complementarity (Henriques and Tuckley, 2012).

Social relationships and social functioning are regarded as analogous to biological-natural processes. Applied in practice, a systems-theoretical approach constructs a holistic picture of the significant social relationships, of the person as part of an ecosystem, and helps social workers to understand better how the problems and resources of people relate to their social networks and environment.

The ecocritical perspective in social work questions more comprehensively the mainstream model of our modern societies that pursues continuous economic growth. It does this by exploiting natural and human resources and in the process increases social inequality. This perspective challenges social work to reflect on its

own role within its technological-economic and bureaucratic-professional contexts. The status of social work in this context means that it becomes dependent on the economic system, which in turn causes the ecological and social crises (Närhi and Matthies, 2016b). The term "ecosocial approach" is used for such actions and models of practice, which are enhancing and supporting people's own "natural" resources (Matthies, Närhi and Ward, 2001). It addresses the quality and resources of the entire living environment, and aims to enable people to get connected with their natural environment as a source of wellbeing. It also aims to create such service settings that are protecting, re-cycling or up-cycling environmental resources. The following practice focus offers an example of applying both ecological theories.

### *Practice focus 15.1*

A new local network of multiple stakeholders from the public and private sectors invites social workers as experts to bring their knowledge to a new project, in particular to support an application for a nationally funded program. The aim of the program is to integrate young unemployed people back into society by improving job creation and social inclusion,. European, national and local institutions report an alarming increase in the social exclusion of young people who neither have access to the labor market, nor are they participating in further training. In the year 2016 an average of 18.6 per cent of young people under 25 were registered unemployed in Europe, while in some countries, such as Greece, it was as high as 46 per cent

(Statista 2016). Almost eight million young Europeans are not in work, education or training. Social workers know that this precarious situation creates serious problems: being an outsider may cause mental health problems, conflicts in the family, financial challenges and the risk of getting involved in anti-social behavior and crime, which can be seen as a threat to mainstream society. At the political level, critical voices are concerned about the missing economic contribution of young people to national wealth. Labour market policies require young people to display more agility, mobility and transferability of skills. What kind of concrete measures and interventions can ecological theories of social work contribute to the project proposal?

### **Methods Applied to the Practice Focus**

Social workers with *the systems-theoretical understanding of ecological social work* suggest a comprehensive program of individual and family-related support for the young people in their social environment. It will include: (i) engagement of the participants; (ii) assessment of their life situation in their social environment including family relations; (iii) a plan of a systematic intervention and its application; and (iv) evaluation. Starting from the basic assumption that human behavior is conditioned by the social environment (Greene and Schriver, 2016), a comprehensive analysis of the social relationships of each young participant needs to be developed. This assessment will be done by drawing on an ecological model according to Bronfenbrenner (1979) alongside an ecomap (Henriques and Tuckley, 2012, p. 173).

As a first pre-condition, the project funding will bring capacities for additional time resources of social workers for unlimited amount of face-to-face meetings with each individual young participant. In these meetings, the young people will draw an ecomap and discuss it step by step with the social worker. It will help to identify those environmental impact factors that cause stress and either help or hinder the mobilization of the young people's resources for more effective job seeking or further training. Furthermore, sources of strength, valued experiences and motivation will be analyzed. The ecological model includes micro (home, friendship, networks, social media), meso (school and job experiences, use of services, organized engagements), macro level (national and local policies, programs, labor market) and exo – fields (physical environment, institutions, bureaucracy) (see Henriques and Tuckley, 2012, p. 167). Consequently social workers will have additional time to focus on each individual young person and their living environment, in order to be able to co-create realistic new perspectives starting from the micro-level of the young people's living environment. Social workers will apply out-searching methods outside of the offices, meet the young people in cafés, clubs and communities, maintain home visits and learn to know also the physical environment of the individual young people they will focus on. The ecomaps will help to analyse with the young people, what are the supportive dimensions in their social systems of micro-level networks, and what kind of contacts they have. For instance, excessive addiction to social media or social isolation can have negative impacts, and need to be discussed together, and tools of relevant harm-reduction need to be created. Social workers will also use the

ecomap to analyse individually, what kind of contacts, experiences and intentions each young person has in relation to educational pathways, use of welfare and other services, and job seeking. Visual drawing of network maps and analysing the different systems level will be helpful especially if young people may have challenges with language skills and in talking about their issues. Systems analysis will help the young people to discover interconnectivity between different zones of challenges in their everyday life. For instance having problems with housing or private space at home may bring obstacles for starting a training that demands concentration on homework. Having health related problems or challenges of mobility may cause a barrier to enter the labour market as job-seeker. Also the impact of the macro-level facts such as current economic development in the region and national programs related to job creation, are important to be taken in the consideration. They usually determinate the labour market opportunities of the young people much more than their own behaviour and motivation.

In the phase of planning and maintaining intervention, targeted individual strategies will be developed to eliminate any personal bias and problems caused by the interaction between the young person and his or her social environment. Access to individual interventions, such as counselling, therapy or targeted training will be included in the project's budget. The interventions can also include joint group activities to offer a new platform and social environment that is designed to

strengthen self-esteem and promote empowerment skills to face new challenging social situations. These interventions are seen to be preconditions for improved employability and motivation for further training, which will be assessed in the final evaluation of the project. The social workers apply the anti-discriminatory approach by respecting the diversity of the individual life circumstances of the young people and with their empowering focus on the young people's own capabilities instead of oppressing them to go to seek jobs. They also consider the discriminating structures of the recruitment practices at the labour market regarding young job seekers without previous job experiences and have to search for methods to improve their wellbeing and self-esteem in the case of disappointments.

In the frame of *the ecocritical perspective* social workers want to contextualize the project aims and activities in a global context and critical development of the labour market. In Europe, where productive work appears not to be available for all people in the future, the nature of work is going to change. Climate change and the need to reduce the use of natural resources will be taken into consideration. On the other hand, the perspectives of smart green growth, job creation in nature-based projects, the new local exchange economy and social entrepreneurship all provide promising solutions (Elsen, 2016; OECD 2011).

While starting the planning process social workers will invite a group of young people facing unemployment to discuss their own wishes towards such a project and regarding their future work aspirations. Some of the young people say that: "We actually don't want to contribute to this polluting system any more. But we would rather be fine if we could have a place, like an old farm, where we could just make our own living, renovate it and grow our food." It transpires that some of the young people were already involved as volunteers in a group called "Re-(f)-Use", which running a social restaurant based on the use of waste food. It offers a more participatory alternative for the charitable delivery of food, which they do not like to visit, even though they are sometimes in need of free food (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2016). Others suggest that it could be possible to creatively develop further the recycling workshops and second-hand shops of their region.

Social workers suggest a plan to establish a social enterprise or collaborate with an existing one. Regarding the special needs of young participants, with, say, social phobia and low self-esteem, social workers can use animal-assisted methods and nature-assisted tools of social work and interventions based on the concept of "green care" (Gallis, 2013). The ideas and arguments from the planning phase will feed into a systematized plan, which can be evaluated against the need to create a new local economy, in harmony with the environment and resource limits of the Earth. In a new radical way, the anti-discriminatory approach means in this case not just an

equal delivery of services to the young unemployed people but their equal opportunity to contribute themselves to the activities they want to develop and to define the content of their own agency in diversity.

### **Conceptual Discussion**

Both the systems-theoretical and ecocritical traditions underline the interactive relationship between humans and the environment. As demonstrated through the practice case, both ecological traditions can be applied on the strong roots of anti-discriminatory practice that is radically committed to equality, diversity and social justice especially by the means of participatory approach and co-creation of the project. But there also remain significant differences between the two traditions. 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 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 are inclined to see ecological issues as disturbing factors in the system. But they do not take an overt political stand in relation to the economic and political structures that produce these disturbances.

While exploring the various conceptualizations emerging in the global debate around the ecocritical tradition in social work, one can identify the following approaches: ecosocial approach; deep-ecological; eco-spiritual; green; social ecological; and environmental. What all of these approaches have in common is that they challenge mainstream social work to broaden its focus and share the critical notion of humans being a crucial part of nature (Närhi and Matthies, 2016a). This deepens the idea of the person-in-environment from a different perspective than previously identified. In our view, the theoretical and practical implications of ecological social work can be promoted by starting with the shared dimensions of the current debates.

### **Research Evidence**

There are some studies that show evidence in adopting ecological social work theories in practice. Gray et al. (2012) provide examples including work with drought-affected families and young offenders, and preservation of "green" space in city areas. There are also social work practices that involve nature and wilderness therapy (Gallis, 2013), food security (Kortetmäki and Silvasti, 2016), community development (Sayer et al., 2016), and animal-assisted social work (Risley-Curtiss, 2010).

Boetto (2016b) has formulated five social work strategies for ecosocial practice. In our eyes, her approach successfully combines the ecocritical tradition of ecological

social work in the practice also with individuals and families, and not only at community and structural level of social work. First, social workers need to develop personal growth towards connectedness with the natural environment, which means increasing your knowledge and action about environmental issues in your personal life. Second, social work needs to continue to develop a holistic approach to human wellbeing. In the context of ecological social work it means understanding human wellbeing from the perspective of sustainable ways of life. Third, social workers can develop communities of practice that promote organizational change. This means collaborating with like-minded workers, organizing environmentally oriented groups, and building alliances with inter-professional groups with environmental scientists and planners, for instance. Fourth, social workers can use community-based approaches in order to enable the mobilization of local resources to develop community-based sustainability initiatives (see Chapter 17 in this volume). Finally, social work can arrange social action to facilitate economic and political change – that is, organize collective social action and advocacy groups for people who share similar environmental and social disadvantage (Boetto, 2016b).

A systematic literature review by Nöjd (2016) focused on actual social work practices considering environmental and sustainability issues. She found that such practices are improving the living environment, infrastructure and facilities, as well as ensuring greater participation and the influence of people. Ecological social work is also

promoting environmental justice, increasing awareness of environmental issues, assessing the impacts of these, negotiating what issues to address, and gathering the resources with partners as necessary to address these issues. The efforts are community based, local, and often multidisciplinary. Many of the activities are adapted from mainstream social work, but accommodated to social work considering issues related to the bio-physical environment (Nöjd, 2016).

### **Conclusion: Challenges Associated with the Theory and Practice of Ecological Social Work**

We argue that both Mary Richmond's and Jane Addams's contributions emphasized the importance of the environment in social work, although in different ways. The common factor in systems theoretical and ecocritical perspectives is their shared view about the imbalance in the relationship between humans and the environment. When it comes to the present day, we should no longer talk about social work's relationship with nature, but understand social work as a part of nature that is shaped by humans. Drawing along the historical line of ecological social work, a similar development can be identified like Mark Doel describes in Chapter 14. Also ecological social work has shifted historically from a strong individualistic focus with psychodynamic thinking, towards a larger social scientific perspective by systems theory and, towards critical sociopolitical perspective by the ecocritical tradition. But we can also learn from the history, that best opportunities for the people in

oppressive circumstance can be developed by social work if both traditions could be combined. Then, both the diversity of individual challenges and resources, and the socio-political and environmental factors at the level of communities, societies and the Earth built together the unique context for people to live and for social work to play its role.

Understanding the politicization of nature (Haila, 2000) in social work practice leads to examining and developing a kind of knowledge and practice that expands the holistic person-in-environment perspectives in social work. In the goal of challenging the mainstream paradigm of social work, ecological social work shares much in common with the critical, structural, radical, feminist and participatory approaches in the profession. They all reflect an understanding of the person-in-environment and the dynamics of power in transactional processes (Coates, 2003; Kemp, 2011).

We agree with Kemp (2011) who argues that never has the need for social work to revitalize its environmental commitments been more urgent. Some studies tell us that it might be worthwhile to consider complexity theory, evolution theory or even neuroscience, which might provide a new understanding of the relationship between people and their environments. Social workers might then focus on affecting the climates that can sustain the conditions (social, ecological, biological, economic, and political) that are essential for human wellbeing (Green and McDermont, 2010).

Therefore, it follows that a global and local ecological framework is needed in social work education, both as a theoretical perspective and as a practical action model (Närhi and Matthies 2016a).

### *Points to Ponder*

- How do social problems and everyday challenges of your clients interlink with problems in their social, built and natural environment?
- What kind of nature-based solutions could you develop together with your clients for strengthening their wellbeing and participative inclusion?
- Which of the interventions and settings you apply in social work that can contribute to sustainability?

### **Key Texts**

McKinnon, J. and Alston, M. (Eds.) (2016). *Ecological social work: Toward sustainability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Matthies, A-L. and Närhi, K. (Eds.) (2016). *Ecosocial transition in society: Contribution of social work and social policy*. New York: Routledge.

Greene, R. R. and Schriver, J. M. (2016). *Handbook of human behavior and the social environment. A Practice-based approach*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

## References

Addams, J. (1910). *Twenty years at Hull House*, with autobiographical notes. Re-published 2004. Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing.

Besthorn, F. (2003). Radical ecologisms: Insights for educating social workers in ecological activism and social justice. *Critical Social Work* 3(1), 66-106

Boetto, H. (2016a). Developing ecological social work for micro-level practice. In: McKinnon, J. and Alston, M. (Eds.). *Ecological social work: Towards sustainability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 59-77.

Boetto, H. (2016b) A transformative ecosocial model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work. *British Journal of social work*. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcw149>

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press

Coates, J. (2003). *Ecology and social work: Towards a new paradigm*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Press.

Dominelli, L (2012). *Green social work: From environmental crises to environmental justice*. Cambridge, UK: Polity.

Elsen, S. (2016). Community-based economy and ecosocial transition. In Matthies, A-L. and Närhi, K. (Eds.). *Ecosocial transition in society. Contribution of social work and social policy*. New York: Routledge. 54–70.

Gallis, C. (2013). Green care: For human therapy, social innovation, rural economy, and education. New York: Nova Science Publishers.

Greene, R. R. and Schriver, J. M. (2016). *Handbook of human behavior and the social environment. A Practice-based approach*. New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers.

Green, D. and McDermott, F. (2010). Social work from inside and between complex systems: Perspectives on person-in-environment for today's social work. *British Journal of Social Work*, 40, 2414–2430.

Germain, C. B. and Gitterman, A. (1980). *The life model of social work practice*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Gray, M., Coates, J., and Hetherington, T. (Eds.) (2012). *Environmental social work*: New York: Routledge.

Haila, Y. and Dyke, C. (2006). Introduction: What to say about nature's "Speech". In Haila, Y. and Dyke, C. (Eds.) (2006). *How nature speaks. The dynamics of human ecological condition*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1-48.

Haila, Y. (2000). Ekologiasta politiikkaan. Kurinpitoa vai solidaarisutta, Tiede ja edistys. 25(2), 80-96.

Henriques, P. and Tuckley, G. (2012). Ecological systems theory and direct work with children and families. In Stepney, P. and Ford, D. (Eds.) *Social work models, methods and theories*. (2<sup>nd</sup> Edn.). Lyme Regis, UK: Russell House Publishing, 166–180.

Kemp, S. P. (2011). Recentring environment in social work practice: Necessity, opportunity, challenge. *British Journal of Social Work*, 41(6), 1198–1210.

Kortetmäki, T., and Silvasti, T. (2016). Charitable food aid in a Nordic welfare state: A case for environmental and social injustice. In Matthies, A-L. & Närhi, K. (Eds.) (2016). *Ecosocial transition in society. Contribution of social work and social policy*. New York: Routledge, 219–234

Matthies, A-L, Närhi, K. and Ward, D. (Eds.) (2001). *The eco-social approach to social work*, Jyväskylä: Sophi.

Matthies, A-L. and Närhi, K. (Eds.) (2016). *Ecosocial transition in society: Contribution of social work and social policy*. New York: Routledge.

Närhi, K. and Matthies, A-L. (2001). What is the ecological (self-)consciousness of social work? Perspectives on the relationship between social work and ecology. In Matthies, A-L., Närhi, K. and Ward, D. (Eds.) *Eco-social approach in social work*. Jyväskylä: Sophi, 16-53.

Närhi, K. & Matthies, A-L. (2016a). Conceptual and historical analysis of ecological social work. In McKinnon, J. and Alston, M. (Eds.) *Ecological social work: Toward sustainability*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 21-38.

Närhi, K. & Matthies, A-L. (2016b) The ecosocial approach in social work as a framework for structural social work. *International Social Work*, 1– 13: DOI: 10.1177/0020872816644663

Nöjd, T. (2016). *A systematic literature review on social work considering environmental issues and sustainable development*. Master's Thesis, University of Jyväskylä, Finland. <https://jyx.jyu.fi/dspace/handle/123456789/52488>

OECD (2011). *Towards green growth*. OECD Publishing:  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/9789264111318-en>

Peeters, J. (2012). The place of social work in sustainable development: Towards ecosocial practice. *International Journal of Social Welfare*, 21(3), 287-298.

Richmond, M. (1917). *Social diagnosis*. Philadelphia: Russell Sage Foundation.  
Reprinted 1964.

Richmond, M. (1922). *What is social case work? An introductory description*. NewYork: Russell Sage Foundation. Reprinted 1939.

Risley-Curtiss, C. (2010). Social workers and the human-companion animal bond: A national study, *Social Work*, 55(1), 38-46.

Statista (2016). *Youth unemployment rate in Europe* (EU member states) as of October 2016. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/266228/youth-unemployment-rate-in-eu-countries/>

Sayer, Th., Grazillo, Ch. and Elsen, S. (2016). *Cities in transition: Social innovation for Europe's urban sustainability*. Routledge.

Staub-Bernasconi, S. (1989) *Soziale Arbeit und Ökologie 100 Jahre vor der ökologischen Wende*. *Neue Praxis* 4 (19) 283-309.