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Creating 'Communities of Practice' to Enhance Ecosocial Work: A Comparison between Finland and Australia

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Abstract

This article reports on findings from a small qualitative study in two industrialised countries—Finland and Australia, which aimed to engage social work practitioners in 'communities of practice' to collaboratively explore ecosocial work practice. Using a Participatory Action Research approach, a series of workshops were established to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions. Data were gathered using qualitative pre- and post-surveys to examine changes to practice, including similarities and differences between Finnish and Australian practitioners. Overall, results indicated that practitioner engagement in the workshops increased their capacity to implement ecosocial work interventions in both countries. Despite differences identified between Finnish and Australian practitioners at the pre-survey phase, many changes identified at the post-survey phase were aligned. These post-changes involved growth in practitioners' personal and professional awareness about ecosocial work, as well as observed positive changes within the organisations they worked. Interestingly, organisations were identified as both a barrier and enabler to implementing ecosocial work interventions. The authors conclude that whilst further research is needed, 'communities of practice' established through the workshops enhanced the practical application of ecosocial work and may provide a way forward for progressing ecosocial work and the profession's response to the global environmental crisis.

Keywords: communities of practice, ecosocial work, environmental social work, green social work, sustainability

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

Introduction

Social work, a profession committed to enhancing human well-being and social justice, has become increasingly concerned about inequities caused by the unfolding global social and environmental crisis (Dominelli, 2018). Recent changes to the world's ecosystems largely caused by human activities since industrialisation and propelled by increasing economic and population growth, have resulted in a range of factors that threaten life on Earth; including increasing climate variability, rising sea levels, increasing pollution, loss of habitat, extinction of species and global warming (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC), 2021). Present and future impacts of this environmental crisis on humans, particularly climate variability, involve large-scale social, environmental and economic costs (IPCC, 2018). Reports also indicate that changes to the world's ecosystems are having an inequitable impact on the world's poorest citizens (World Health Organisation (WHO), 2005), including whole populations in poorer countries and disadvantaged groups in wealthier countries (United Nations, 2020).

In response to these inequitable impacts, ecosocial work has gained momentum in social work. Ecosocial work, also referred to as green social work and environmental social work, refers to a practice approach that recognises the symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural environment (Närhi and Matthies, 2016; Ramsay and Boddy, 2017; Dominelli, 2018). Ecosocial work transcends Euro-Western socio-cultural perspectives of the environment made up of social, cultural and institutional aspects, by understanding Earth as a holistic entity made up of interdependent relationships between all living organisms (Powers, 2016; Närhi and Matthies, 2017). According to various authors, ecosocial work involves a multidimensional approach to practice that incorporates concern for the natural environment at the micro (individuals and families), meso (group and organisations) and macro (community and political) levels of practice (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017).

Notable progress in developing ecosocial work has occurred through various types of research, particularly in the context of disasters such as climatic events (e.g. Hay and Pascoe, 2021) and the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g. Nouman, 2021). In addition, the conceptualisation of theory (e.g. Dominelli, 2013), the accumulation of case studies (e.g. Alston et al., 2016), and interviews and surveys with practitioners about their attitudes and perspectives (e.g. Powers, 2016) have built capacity within the profession for progressing ecosocial work practice. However, various authors have advocated for a critical appraisal of ecosocial work involving a progressive and integrative analysis of broader and dominant discourses. According to Gray and Coates (2015), social work needs to fundamentally rethink the impact of humanistic values in the profession

that contradict environmental sustainability. Other authors challenge inherent modernist assumptions underpinning contemporary social work practice, such as individualism and industrial capitalism that support a culture of domination and exploitative tendencies towards Earth's natural resources (Boetto, 2019). These issues cast light on the need for critical approaches to research that create opportunities for developing holistic and transformative approaches to practice.

This need for research to further develop an evidence base for ecosocial work has been noted by various authors (e.g. Mason *et al.*, 2017; Boetto *et al.*, 2020). A recent scoping review undertaken by Mason *et al.* (2017) relating to the global environmental crisis identified a lack of research examining practice interventions. Out of 112 social work studies between the years 1985 and 2015, just forty-three (38 per cent) examined practice interventions (Mason *et al.*, 2017). Interestingly, of these practice-related studies, the majority emphasised the meso- and macro levels of practice compared to the micro level. Although some studies were categorised as focusing on more than one level of practice, the review identified that thirty-seven out of forty-three studies (86 per cent) emphasised meso- and macro practices, whilst just nineteen (44 percent) emphasised micro practice (Mason *et al.*, 2017). The relatively small number of studies focusing on practice interventions, and within this an even smaller number on micro-level practice, reflects calls from several authors to explore the complexities and practical realities of ecosocial work (e.g. Boetto, 2016).

In the context of professional practice, participatory approaches to research offer an opportunity to foreground the skills, experience and wisdom of practitioners for developing ecosocial work (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). Participatory approaches to research seek to bridge the gap between research and practice; and reflect an egalitarian approach to research that emphasises participation and action through collective inquiry (Bradbury, 2015; Alston and Bowles, 2018). Participatory approaches to research correspond with the ethos of 'communities of practice' and are often used simultaneously (e.g. Harvey and Fredericks, 2017). Like participatory research, communities of practice involve a group of people who share a common concern and come together to develop new knowledge and best practice approaches (Mercieca, 2017). According to Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner (2015), communities of practice have three defining features—the domain, community and practice. The 'domain' refers to the shared interest that forms the focus and identity of the group. A sense of 'community' involves relationships of growing mutual trust and respect, which enables the sharing of ideas, and a deepening of learning as members realise, they can share experiences without fear of ridicule (Mercieca, 2017, p. 10). Finally, strong 'practice' can lead to outputs such as new knowledge and innovative practice approaches (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

By forming communities of practice through a series of workshops, this research aimed to engage with social workers to collaboratively explore ecosocial work interventions. Balancing the three defining features of communities of practice involved establishing a focus and identity relating to ecosocial work, creating a sense of community based on respect and trust, and developing action-oriented ecosocial work interventions in the practitioners' workplaces. This article examines the similarities and differences between Finnish and Australian practitioners as reported in qualitative pre- and post-surveys.

Methodology

A research design drawing on the principles of Participatory Action Research (PAR) was adopted for the study. The distinctive nature of PAR is that it seeks to create knowledge and identify practical solutions to issues of pressing concern (Bradbury, 2015). PAR reflects an egalitarian approach to research that emphasises participation and action through collective inquiry (Bradbury, 2015). The principle of participation means that the relationship between researcher and researched is transformed into a collaborative partnership through which people (i.e. researchers and participants) come together on equal terms as co-inquirers (Alston and Bowles, 2018). The principle of action is embedded in a four-stage cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting (Wadsworth, 2011), and corresponds with the overall applied research aim to plan, implement and evaluate ecosocial work interventions.

PAR techniques share much in common with communities of practice and are often used together (e.g. Harvey and Fredericks, 2017). In this study, communities of practice were formed from volunteer practitioners who participated in a short-term series of workshops, established separately in each country but following the same methodology and using the same ecosocial work model described below. The researchers in both countries were social workers who used strategies for developing mutual aid groups to form functioning communities of practice. These strategies included establishing rapport, trust and safety through developing explicit ground rules, shared purpose, linking member experiences and transferring power to the group (Shulman, 1986, 2015; Muskat *et al.*, 2020).

As is recommended by theorists and researchers establishing communities of practice (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2007), the researchers were not directly involved in trialling the interventions but provided advice and mentoring to participants. This support involved celebrating successes, listening to experiences, encouraging participants to feed off each other and develop creative practice together (Mitchell and Mitchell, 2007, p. 25) and challenging participants to look more deeply whilst ensuring

they stayed close to the research objectives of exploring how to introduce ecosocial work interventions in their workplaces. Thus, the terms 'practitioners' and 'participants' refer to the social work practitioners who participated in the study and excludes the researchers. Researchers in each country adhered to their university's guidelines for conducting ethical research.

The model adopted for developing ecosocial work interventions was the transformative ecosocial work model developed by Boetto (2017). A detailed explanation of this model is beyond the scope of this article; however, in brief, this model challenges modernist fixed assumptions within the profession that contradict environmental sustainability by adopting a congruent philosophical base of practice. The model incorporates ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice that emphasise the interdependence between humans and the natural environment. In accordance with the transformative ecosocial work model (Boetto, 2017), practitioners were guided through the five levels of practice at the methodological (doing) dimension of practice, which broadly align with micro-, meso- and macro concepts, and include the personal (self), individual, group, community and structural levels of practice. As part of a holistic approach to transformative ecosocial change, it is noteworthy that one of these five levels of practice includes the personal 'self'; highlighting that practitioners' personal awareness of the interconnected relationship between humanity and the natural environment reflects an ontological base congruent with environmental sustainability (Norton, 2012).

The research was conducted in Finland and Australia, two industrialised countries, with different social service systems, cultures and patterns of living and working. In Australia, social workers are employed across public and private sectors. The Australian community of practice formed for this research comprised volunteers from a regional area of south-eastern New South Wales. This area encompassed one of the largest regional cities in the state of New South Wales with a population of approximately 60,000 people, surrounded by fertile agricultural rural districts. A range of social service contexts operate across the region, centred in the city, involving diverse public and private organisations. Social workers are employed across a diverse range of agencies including family and child support services, income security, hospitals, community health centres, schools, employment services, corrections and juvenile justice, housing, disability and aged care services.

In contrast, Finnish social workers are primarily employed in the public sector and the provision of social work services are provided by local level municipalities. Volunteers for the Finnish community of practice were drawn from the municipality which employed all the participants. The city in which the Finnish community of practice formed is the seventh largest in Finland with a population of 142,400 people. Services

provided by the public sector operate according to a life-cycle model, inclusive of a range of services for people with disabilities, immigrants, children, families, the working-age population and older adults.

Methods

The research included two data-generating strategies. The first strategy consisted of qualitative pre- and post-surveys to ascertain subjective measures of change in practice across both countries. This was the primary data-gathering technique due to its intended purpose of providing an international comparison of changes in practice following the workshops, including similarities and differences between practitioners in each country. Data from this strategy are the focus of this article.

The second data-gathering strategy occurred during the workshops with data being gathered separately in each country. Workshops in Australia took place over a three-month period and workshops in Finland took place over a four-month period. Data from these workshops were collected via recordings of discussions, meeting minutes, brainstorming activities and reflective–practice exercises. Workshops were purposed towards collaboratively planning, implementing, and evaluating ecosocial work interventions. The structure and activities of the workshops have been reported elsewhere (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). An ongoing process of critical reflection considered practitioners' experiences, issues (barriers and enablers), knowledge and theory and opportunities for improving practice in the future. Preliminary outcomes from the Australian workshops have been reported (Boetto *et al.*, 2020), and outcomes of the Finnish workshops will be reported soon. Overall, this data revealed that practitioners introduced a range of interventions at the personal (e.g. composting and growing vegetables), individual (e.g. nature-based therapy) and group (e.g. sustainable living programmes, staff training) levels of practice, and to a lesser extent at the community and structural levels of practice (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). Discussion will now return to the pre- and post-survey data.

Pre- and post-surveys

Qualitative pre- and post-surveys were used to ascertain subjective measures of change in practice within each community of practice, including similarities and differences between the Finnish and Australian practitioners. Survey questions were open-ended, enabling practitioners to provide multiple responses to each question. This qualitative approach to comparison afforded a deeper understanding of any changes that occurred in ecosocial work practice than a quantitative design could provide (Braun *et al.*, 2021).

The purpose of the pre-survey was to establish a basis for understanding practitioners' initial level of knowledge and practice relating to ecosocial work. This survey consisted of nine open-ended questions specifically exploring their current understandings of ecosocial work, views about the profession's and employing organisation's attitudes to ecosocial work and current practice experiences.

At the conclusion of the final workshop a post-survey was administered to explore practitioners' perspectives about their overall experience of participation in the workshops and to gain a subjective measure of any changes that might have occurred to their practice. The post-survey consisted of eight open-ended questions relating to changes to practitioners' personal understanding, professional knowledge and practice, organisational context and enablers and barriers to implementing ecosocial work interventions.

Participants

As this was a small exploratory qualitative study involving the development of communities of practice through a time limited series of workshops, participant numbers had to be small enough for a functioning face to face community of practice to develop over a short space of time in each country. Due to the different social service systems in each country, the identification and recruitment of practitioners varied. In Australia, volunteers were sought by approaching the local social work group via email within the regional area described above. The nine social work practitioners who participated in the study worked within a range of practice contexts (Table 1) and were employed in a variety of roles. All participants were employed by organisations whose services emphasised micro-level practice with individuals and families ($n = 9$), and the majority had frontline roles working with service users ($n = 6$). Three participants were employed as team leaders, providing clinical supervision to staff employed in those roles. Although ten participants

Table 1. Australian and Finnish practitioners' contexts of practice

Practice context	Number of participants
Australian participants	
Mental health	3
Child and family practice	3
Hospital social work	1
Multicultural social work	1
Aged care	1
Finnish participants	
Young adult services	4
Adults social work services	4
Immigration services	2

commenced the project, one withdrew in the early phase of the project for personal reasons.

In Finland, following discussion with the local municipality, volunteers were recruited via e-mail through the supervisors of various services offered by that municipality. Although they shared the same employer, practitioners worked across various services and teams, which focused on different fields of micro-level practice (Table 1). One of the practitioners who participated in the study was employed as a team leader and the others were either social workers or social welfare workers. A total of twelve employees participated in the study in Finland; however, one responded to the pre-survey only and one to the post-survey only, so survey data from these two participants were excluded, leaving ten Finnish participants.

A major difference between the two groups was that Finnish practitioners were employed by the same municipality, where formal approval from management for participation in the project was gained, with several working in the same teams. Whilst some of the Australian practitioners worked in the same field of practice (e.g. mental health and child and family practice), they were each employed by different organisations and formal approval from management was not gained. Australian practitioners, therefore, attended the workshops outside of work hours. All practitioners were provided information about the research and gave their informed consent to participate in their respective countries.

Data analysis

Data from the surveys were initially collated by researchers located in their respective countries, which involved organising and combining the responses for each survey question. Following collation of the data, the researchers met to discuss the responses together at a broad level, including general commonalities, differences and points of importance. Using Richards' (2015) three-phase coding approach, the researchers then examined the data more closely from their respective countries and developed initial codes, open codes, and topic codes for each survey question. Author 1 located in Australia and Author 2 located in Finland took primary responsibility for this qualitative coding process. To gauge inter-coder consistency, the authors met regularly to compare and contrast their initial, independently developed open codes and combined the two sets of codes into refined topic codes. The third author provided a critical review of this coding process to ensure different dimensions in the data were captured and intercultural factors considered. Finally, analytic, thematic codes for each survey question were developed to

interpret the data, comparing results for the pre- and post-survey results wherever possible.

Results

Analytic themes that emerged from the pre- and post-survey findings revealed differences and similarities between practitioners in the two countries, as well as changes to practice experienced as a result of the workshops. Themes identified included practitioners' personal growth, professional practice development, understanding of sustainable development, organisational change and experience of enablers and barriers. Pseudonyms are used when quoting participants' comments.

Personal ('self') growth

Overall, pre- and post-surveys revealed positive changes to practitioners' relationship with the natural environment in their personal lives, that is, outside of the workplace.

In the pre-survey all practitioners identified the natural environment as being important to them personally (Finland $n = 10$; Australia $n = 9$). Participants in both countries specifically referred to the importance of outdoor activities in their personal lives (Finland $n = 2$; Australia $n = 2$), undertaking personal activities to promote sustainability (Finland $n = 1$; Australian $n = 4$) and the need of nature for personal well-being, although this latter aspect was more prominent amongst the Finnish participants (Finland $n = 7$; Australia $n = 2$). In relation to personal well-being, Oona from Finland said, 'I exercise daily in nature. Nature gives me energy and esthetical experiences. The natural environment is a place where I forget about worries and stress.'

In the post-survey nearly all participants reported an increase in a personal understanding of and relationship with the natural environment in their personal lives (Finland $n = 8$; Australia $n = 9$) with most practitioners listing more than one change they had noticed. Finnish participants referred to actively increasing their exposure to the natural environment to improve well-being ($n = 4$), increased household recycling ($n = 4$), promoting the involvement of children in nature-based activities and recycling ($n = 2$) and improved sustainable shopping choices ($n = 2$). The remaining two practitioners from Finland stated that they were already environmentally conscious ($n = 2$). Raija from Finland said, 'My appreciation of nature has deepened and the time that I spend in nature has increased. I want to bring children even more in connection with nature (trips, quick strolls outside). Most of my free time I spend in nature, now even more consciously.'

Australian participants also reported an increase in personal understanding of and relationship with the natural environment in the post-survey, including an increase in consciousness about the presence of nature in their lives ($n=4$), increased awareness of their individual impact on the natural environment ($n=3$), increased household recycling and composting ($n=2$), improved sustainable consumer choices ($n=1$), improved emotional well-being ($n=1$), increase in exposure to the natural environment ($n=1$) and promoting involvement of family members in nature-based activities ($n=1$). Simon from Australia said, 'I'm much more conscious of the environment, my impact, and ways I can apply an eco-lens to my personal life.'

Professional practice development

Overall, pre- and post-surveys indicated positive changes to an understanding of the natural environment in social work, as well as the integration of the natural environment in professional practice. Whilst practitioners' initial level of knowledge identified in the pre-surveys varied between countries, the post-surveys were more consistent with all participants in both countries reporting an increase in ecosocial work knowledge and practice.

In the pre-surveys most Finnish participants identified an understanding of the positive impacts of nature on human well-being, including enhanced communication, relaxation and experiential learning and identity formation ($n=9$). In contrast, less than half of the Australian participants referred to the positive impacts of nature on human well-being ($n=4$) with an additional three participants identifying potential negative impacts, such as drought, water scarcity and poor health outcomes ($n=3$). One Australian practitioner also recognised both positive and negative effects on individuals and communities. Miranda from Australia said:

> Working in regional communities that mainly revolve around farming the natural environment can be hugely influential, for example floods, droughts and access to water for farming, mice and locust plagues. Individuals, families and communities are impacted in many ways, but it is often the financial impact that contributes to psychological stress and in turn the suicide rate in these communities.

One practitioner from each country also reported making no observations about the impacts of the natural environment on the individuals and communities with whom they work.

As part of the pre-survey participants were also asked about the practice interventions (if any) that they had been involved with in their workplace that relate to the natural environment. The majority of Finnish participants had implemented interventions relating to the

natural environment in their current roles ($n = 7$), such as nature-based group activities, compared to only one Australian participant. Conversely, most of the Australian participants reported limited to no practice activity relating to the natural environment ($n = 5$), compared to one Finnish practitioner. However, Australian practitioners referred to strategies undertaken by their organisations ($n = 2$), including reduced electricity and bottled water usage, and the use of nature for therapeutic purposes. Some practitioners also referred to previous positions as having a focus on the natural environment (Finland $n = 4$; Australia $n = 1$).

In the post-survey, all participants from both countries reported an increase in their awareness and integration of the natural environment in practice (Finland $n = 10$; Australia $n = 9$), with most listing more than one change relating to their practice. Megan from Australia said:

> Almost on a daily basis now I am trying to link the natural environment into groups, one-to-one interventions, and other activities on the unit. I am so much more aware now of the positive impact the environment has on mental health and wellbeing.

As part of the post-survey, practitioners identified specific practice interventions (Finland $n = 7$; Australia $n = 8$), including individual therapeutic interventions, outdoor nature-based mindfulness activities, integration of environmentally friendly and 'thrifty' household ideas into skills groups and in-service professional development for staff. Participants also referred to an increase in organisational sustainable practices within their employing organisation (Finland $n = 5$; Australia $n = 1$), such as composting leftover food, energy saving activities in the office and recycling plastics. Eevi from Finland said:

> The natural environment can be used for different purposes with different groups of clients [such as] calming down/mindfulness, searching for experiences, surpassing oneself/experiences of winning…experiencing adrenalin peaks in a healthy way, for example climbing/rafting versus drug abuse.

Sustainable development

Despite differences between Finnish and Australian participants' understanding of sustainable development in the pre-survey, most participants in both countries reported increased understanding about the importance of sustainable development in the post-survey.

In the pre-survey, participants in both countries expressed an understanding about the importance of the sustainable use of resources for future generations (Finland $n = 4$; Australia $n = 5$). However, nearly all Finnish participants associated sustainable development with their specific social work role ($n = 8$), compared to a minority of Australian

participants ($n=3$). Raija from Finland said, 'Social work can enable in many different ways activities that follow ideas of sustainable development, [including] sharing information concerning it, limitation of means, equality etc.' Additionally, one Australian social worker referred to having limited understanding about sustainable development.

In the post-survey, participants in both countries reported an increase in awareness of sustainable development and an increase in observed discussions about sustainable development in their workplaces (Finland $n=5$; Australia $n=6$). For example, Mateo from Australia said, 'A few colleagues now talk sustainability and are engaged in activities to minimise the negative impact of their environmental footprint.' With reference to sustainable development, participants in Finland also made specific mention of organisational activities relating to recycling (Finland $n=5$; Australia $n=0$). Timo from Finland said, 'Knowledge about recycling increased and at our workplace we organise cardboard, paper and plastics ourselves.' Also, some practitioners reported no change (Finland $n=1$; Australia $n=3$).

Organisational change

Observations of how well employing organisations understand the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being differed between countries in the pre-survey; despite this, in the post-survey nearly all participants in both countries reported an increase in their organisation's awareness, understanding and discussion.

For Finnish participants, who were all employed by the same local municipality, the majority view in the pre-survey was that their organisation had some understanding about the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being ($n=7$). For Australian participants, who were employed by diverse private and public organisations, the majority view in the pre-survey was that their employing organisation had limited understanding ($n=7$). Fernando from Australia said 'Not very...and when we [our organisation] make conscious decisions to reduce our impact on the environment and then reverse these decisions it certainly doesn't send the message that understanding these relationships is a priority.' One Australian practitioner working in two organisations noted that one organisation had an understanding, whilst the other organisation did not.

In the post-survey, most participants in both countries referred to an increase in awareness, understanding and discussion about the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being within their organisations (Finland $n=10$; Australia $n=7$). Taina from Finland said, 'The topic has been talked about a lot more during this project. The natural environment has been brought up more systematically, for example

integrating it in our regular teamwork.' Similarly, Jamilla from Australia noted, 'This is now a topic of discussion [in our workplace]. Our individual interests now have a forum where they can be shared. I intend to continue supporting and enabling this conversation which will assist the development of practice.' Two Australian practitioners reported no change.

Experience of enablers and barriers

Participants in both countries experienced a range of factors that facilitated the implementation of ecosocial work interventions, as well as factors that prevented or inhibited their efforts to implement ecosocial work interventions.

Enablers

Factors enabling ecosocial work interventions (Table 2) included positive relationships with colleagues (Finland $n = 7$; Australia $n = 2$), having a strategic approach to practice (Finland $n = 3$; Australia $n = 2$) and organisational attributes (Finland $n = 3$; Australia $n = 5$).

Barriers

A major factor identified as inhibiting ecosocial work interventions, or which prevented the full realisation of interventions (see Table 3) involved organisational barriers (Finland $n = 9$ Australia $n = 9$). One Finnish practitioner said there were no barriers. Australian participants mentioned additional barriers including negative attitudes of colleagues ($n = 3$), lack of knowledge in social work ($n = 9$) and the broader societal view that nature is separate from humanity (Australia $n = 2$).

Perspectives of national professional associations understanding of the natural environment in social work

Overall, the majority of Finnish participants expressed the view that the social work profession in Finland is developing an understanding of the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being ($n = 8$), whereas this was the minority view of Australian participants ($n = 3$). Most Australian participants expressed the view that the social work profession in Australia has a limited understanding of the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being ($n = 6$), a view shared by only two of the Finnish participants. Peter from

Table 2. Enablers facilitating ecosocial interventions

Factors	Finnish practitioners	Australian practitioners
Positive relationships with colleagues Fin = 8; Aus = 2	• Commitment of team to this project • Support of colleagues • Chance to work with like-minded colleagues • Freedom/courage/support to experiment and permission to fail	• Finding like-minded colleagues • Having a strong reputation, recognised experience and/or being a long-term employee within organisation
Strategic approach to practice Fin = 3; Aus = 2	• Taking small steps • Collaboration with other organisations • Maintaining good practices	• Being ecologically mindful, and taking advantage of unplanned opportunities that arise in practice • Being strategic and having a planned approach when implementing interventions
Organisational attributes Fin = 3; Aus = 5	• Managerial support	• Smaller organisations are more conducive to being flexible • Small teams facilitate communication, and encourage close and positive relationships • Some positions have scope within the role description, which enables creativity • Positions with specific community development activities allow more scope for ecosocial interventions

Australia said, 'To be honest not much. The industry may, but our policies and things like that restrict us a lot.'

Discussion

As a small, short-term qualitative project involving a small number of practitioners employed by organisations emphasising micro level practice, the results of this research provide a contextualised focus for exploring ecosocial work practice. This small focus nevertheless highlights that within the parameters of the participants' positions, the results indicated that practitioner engagement in the workshops increased their capacity to implement ecosocial work interventions in both countries. Analytic themes that emerged from the pre- and post-survey findings revealed differences and similarities in changes to practice. Despite differences identified between Finnish and Australian participants at the pre-survey phase, many changes at the post-survey phase were aligned. Key themes

Table 3. Barriers to implementing ecosocial work interventions

Factors	Finnish practitioners	Australian practitioners
Organisational attributes Fin = 11; Aus = 9	• Lack of financial resources and time • Organisational culture not open to new ideas • Difficulties with raising new ideas with management which might be interpreted as criticism of existing approaches	• Restrictive organisational contracts and role descriptions • Lack of financial resources and time • Large offices and fragmented teams • Lack of organisational approach and policy • Part-time work and limited access to team structures and communication processes • Services do not have a holistic model of practice, and emphasise medical diagnosis • Position in organisation being powerless to create change
Negative attitudes of colleagues Fin = 0; Aus = 3	NA	• Attitudes of colleagues in general • Attitudes of some older practitioners • Perceived lack of professionalism with ecosocial methods of intervention
Knowledge within social work Fin = 0; Aus = 9	NA	• Lack of practitioner ecological awareness and knowledge • Lack of professional development and training • Lack of evidence base and history within profession • Perceptions of 'professionalism' that are not inclusive of outdoor activities and the natural environment
Other Fin = 0; Aus = 2	NA	• Environmental trauma experienced by service users inhibit willingness to associate with natural environment for example survivors of sexual assault and refugees/asylum seekers • Society mostly views the natural environment as separate to humans, and therefore does not consider sustainability and the natural environment as relevant to health and well-being
No barrier Fin = 1; Aus = 0	• Everyone has endeavoured to embrace new ecosocial interventions	NA

NA, Not applicable.

identified from the data included practitioners' personal growth, professional practice development, understanding of sustainable development, organisational change and experience of enablers and barriers.

Key differences identified between countries at the pre-survey phase related to Finnish participants' high level of personal interest and positive connection to the natural environment, as expressed through the importance of the natural environment to their personal well-being. Finnish participants were also more likely than Australian participants to be utilising current ecosocial work interventions in their practice, such as nature-based group activities. Also, whilst participants in both countries reported observations relating to the positive impacts of nature on human well-being, only Australian participants reported observing negative impacts, such as drought, water scarcity and poor health outcomes. These perspectives perhaps reflect increasing exposure to adverse weather events in Australia and recent research indicating that people in Australia are five times more likely to be displaced by a climate disaster than people living in Europe (Steffan and Bradshaw, 2021). As the effects of climate change unfold, these negative impacts identified by Australian participants could be a motivating factor for progressing ecosocial work in the future.

At the post-survey phase, results indicated that workshop participation increased the capacity of practitioners to implement ecosocial work interventions. Participants in both countries reported positive changes in their personal relationship with the natural environment, and in their capacity to incorporate concern for the natural environment into practice. As Boetto *et al.* (2020) reported from workshop data, participants introduced a range of interventions at the personal (e.g. composting and growing vegetables), individual (e.g. nature-based therapy) and group (e.g. sustainable living programmes, staff training) levels of practice, and to a lesser extent at the community and structural levels of practice. According to the survey data reported on in this article, participants in both countries reported an increase in their understanding about sustainable development and positive changes to their organisation or teams' understanding of the relationship between the natural environment and human well-being. These positive changes to practitioners' capacity to engage in ecosocial work practice in both countries are consistent with the study's preliminary findings in Australia (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). However, of importance in this comparative analysis is that positive changes to practice occurred despite differences identified between countries before the commencement of the workshops. In other words, despite having different starting points in some areas at the pre-survey phase, practitioners in both countries enhanced their capacity to implement ecosocial work interventions.

Organisational attributes ranked highest for both countries as a barrier to implementing ecosocial work interventions despite the differing social service systems in each country. For Finnish participants, the most

identified barrier relating to organisational attributes included lack of financial resources and time. Whilst Australian participants also referred to financial resources and time, they identified additional factors indicative of a privatised social service system, such as restrictive organisational contracts and funding requirements. These organisational attributes relating to the Australian context were also identified as barriers in another Australian study that explored the adaptive capacity of community organisations in response to natural disasters (Mallon *et al.*, 2013). Interestingly, findings in relation to enablers also identified organisational attributes as common between both countries with Australian participants referring to smaller organisations and teams, as well as positions that have scope for creativity or macro practice. Finnish participants referred to managerial support within their organisation as conducive to ecosocial work practice, which is not surprising given this support was gained prior to commencement of the study. Nevertheless, this evidence suggests the importance of engaging with organisations as a way for moving forward with the development of ecosocial work.

Communities of practice established through workshop participation became a prominent feature of the workshops in both countries. Using their professional skills in mutual aid groupwork (Shulman, 2015, Muskat *et al.*, 2020), the researchers established an environment where participants were able to develop a shared interest in ecosocial work, a sense of community based on respect and trust and action-oriented ecosocial work interventions relevant to each practitioner's workplace. These characteristics correspond with the three defining features of communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner and Wenger-Trayner, 2015) and were strengthened in the workshop groups as they matured. Given that workshop participation increased the capacity of practitioners to implement ecosocial work interventions, it is reasonable to consider that communities of practice may offer a way forward for progressing ecosocial work practice in other contexts, including educational or professional development settings, practice groups and professional organisations. Communities of practice provide a context for the transfer of knowledge, and the active experimentation of practice approaches to develop best practice (Mercieca, 2017). They are reflexive, open and responsive to the changing needs of practice in the context of a changing climate. Importantly, by adopting an egalitarian and collaborative approach between researchers and practitioners, communities of practice recognise the expertise and knowledge of practitioners on the front line.

Given that practitioners in both countries were employed by organisations emphasising micro level practice, this study primarily focused on ecosocial work with individuals and families. Much of the emerging literature and knowledge base for ecosocial work practice recognises an environmentally aware form of practice at the macro level, for example with communities, organisations and public policy (Mason *et al.*, 2017). Yet,

the micro level of practice, often referred to as social care, casework or direct practice, involving work with individuals and families lacks detail despite it being a major form of social work, particularly in industrialised countries (Boetto, 2016). As a small study, further research is needed to explore the implementation of ecosocial work interventions at the micro level of practice, as well as the need to research the effectiveness of communities of practice on a larger scale with more practitioners across different geographical locations within countries. Finally, as the project took place in two industrialised countries, further research on the effects of communities of practice in relation to ecosocial work practice across diverse international contexts would develop further insights.

Limitations

As a small, short-term project with practitioners to collaboratively explore ecosocial work practice, this study had many limitations. Perhaps, the most significant were the challenges associated with cross-cultural research, including differences between each country's approach to social service provision and language translation. As a Nordic country, Finland is widely regarded as having a strong institutionalised welfare state compared to other industrialised countries (Nyby *et al.*, 2018), which meant that all Finnish practitioners were employed in the public sector. The Australian welfare state is characterised by a more residual and increasingly privatised approach to social service provision, often involving contractual funding for non-government and philanthropic organisations (Chenoweth and McAuliffe, 2021). Australian practitioners were therefore employed across a range of public and private organisations. Additionally, Finnish data were collected in the Finnish language and Australian data collected in the English language, causing translation challenges common in cross-cultural research. As a qualitative research project where language is core to data, the translation of words, as well as the conceptual interpretation of language concepts was undertaken using an open, reflexive and pragmatic approach to promote accurate translation (Erhard *et al.*, 2021).

Other limitations of the study involved the short-time frame, which meant that only changes attempted by practitioners within the three to four-month period of the study could be identified. It is possible that further attempts at planning, implementing, and evaluating ecosocial work interventions could have occurred over a longer period, particularly as the communities of practice gained further momentum. There was also no possibility within the scope of this study to evaluate whether the changes measured could be sustained over time. Additionally, only a small number of practitioners from each country engaged in the project, which affected the size of the data and reduced the capacity for identifying common elements as part of the analyses process. Further, a

qualitative approach to the study provided a subjective measure of change, making no claim to statistical validity or the generalisability of findings. However, a quantitative approach to comparison was not considered appropriate for the exploratory nature of this study, which required a deeper understanding of nuanced changes that occurred in ecosocial work practice (Braun *et al.*, 2021).

Conclusion

Overall, the results of this study indicated that practitioners from both countries increased their capacity to implement ecosocial work interventions. Although some differences were evident, particularly in relation to practitioner perspectives prior to participation in the project, many changes at the conclusion of the project across both countries were aligned. Given this overall positive change towards ecosocial work practice, outcomes from this project support the notion that forming communities of practice amongst motivated social work colleagues to share ideas, learn from one another and support each other has the potential to advance ecosocial work practice. Although cultural differences may need to be considered in other contexts, there may be potential for communities of practice to provide a way forward for progressing ecosocial work and the profession's response to the global environmental crisis.

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