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# 13

## THE ECOSOCIAL PARADIGM IN SOCIAL WORK

Striving for planetary well-being

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### **Introduction**

The chapter focuses on the planetary well-being concept from the perspective of social work and is structured in four main parts. First, we will briefly introduce social work as a practice-oriented profession and academic discipline that has many different forms globally. Second, we will describe the new paradigm of ecosocial work. Ecosocial work attempts to readjust the professions' main emphasis on social problems of and between human beings to a position that puts humanity's dependence on the natural environment at its centre. Third, we will examine how the planetary well-being concept can be a fruitful addition to ecosocial work concepts and social work in general. Here we will focus on the implications of the planetary well-being concept for social work ethics. We argue that social work, as a human-centred profession and discipline, must strike a balance between critical anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric perspectives. In the fourth and final part, we discuss critically what ethical dilemmas could arise if the idea of planetary well-being would be fully implemented in social work practice. In conclusion, we identify planetary well-being as a useful addition to current discussions in social work.

### **Social work as an academic discipline and a practice-oriented profession**

Social work simultaneously refers to many things: An academic discipline, a research-based, practice-oriented profession combined with a related service system, as well as social movements committed to the enhancement of human well-being. The groups and individuals that social work focuses on and collaborates with are often identified as vulnerable, oppressed, or living in poverty. In their own ways, from the premise

of collective responsibility, the different branches of social work aspire to promote social change, social cohesion, and empowerment. While many other professions and disciplines share similar ideals of social justice, the strong foundation in an ethical and moral discourse is a distinctive feature of social work (International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), 2018; Witkin, 2003, p. 239).

With origins in the practices of both state and religion-based forms of organized care and support for those in need, social work has its roots in philanthropic work, community-organizing, and social movements. As an academic discipline, however, social work has only been formed globally over the last 50 years, with significant differences between countries. During this time, it has seen a long development of professionalization and an extension of its fields of action and responsibilities. Although an academic discipline in its own right, social work has interfaces with many other disciplines, such as psychology or social and public policy, and it employs theoretical and methodological inputs from other social and behavioural sciences. While social work has also been identified as part of social movements or as voluntary work, globally the trend has been a gradual professionalization of social work practice and academicization of social work education. Especially in the Nordic welfare states such as Finland, social work is closely entwined with the public system of welfare services.

As a profession, social work has its own ethical standards, manifested in international and national social work codes of ethics. According to the global definition of the social work profession (IFSW and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), 2014), the principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility, and respect for diversities are central to social work. On a general level, social workers cooperate with people in attempts to solve social problems and provide support for individuals and communities, ideally promoting social change on a structural and political level. Whatever the status and local organizational structures, social work is expected to encompass community work, health care services, and political processes for greater equality and inclusiveness of societies (*e.g.*, Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2010, p. 307). However, in the service infrastructures of modern welfare states, social workers are mainly directed to work at the micro level with individual service-users, and less on the community level.

### **The ecosocial paradigm in social work**

The acknowledgement of the importance of the physical environment in social work can be traced back to its early beginnings as a profession and discipline (Närhi and Matthies, 2016; Stamm, 2021b; Staub-Bernasconi, 1989). During that time, in the late 19th century, urban or built environments started to be a concern for the forerunners of today's social workers. This included, among other issues, questions regarding air and water quality, waste removal, sanitation, and healthy food (*e.g.*, Waris, 2016). In the USA, these early, environmentally aware social workers, among them Jane Addams, often had strong links to the Chicago School

of Sociology and especially urban sociology. They analyzed the living conditions of (migrant) workers in cities and developed methods and interventions to tackle problems of the urban environment in cooperation with the inhabitants. These methods and interventions led to a gradual improvement in the living conditions of the urban poor in industrialized countries. However, after World War II, in the globally hegemonic western social work, notions of the environment narrowed to perceiving it primarily as social, cultural, and economic, but excluding to a greater extent any connection to the natural environment (Närhi and Matthies, 2016).

Ecosocial work, overlapping with concepts such as environmental, ecological, or green social work, is built on the premise that humans are part of, and dependent on, the web of life on Earth. Hence, the human responsibility is to safeguard, and at a minimum not overly harm, the delicate balance of ecosystems and other complex interconnected systems that life on Earth depends on. Thus, ecosocial work has been critically questioning the growth-based economic foundation of the existing welfare states and social work (Matthies, 2001). For the time being, concurrent ecological crises, which are chiefly caused by extractivist overconsumption of natural resources, particularly by overconsuming population groups and economic sectors globally, endanger the continuity of many life forms, and in the long run humanity itself. While this alone challenges the ethical justification and meaningfulness of extractivist relationships with “nature” (Pihlström, 2020), it contradicts social work’s mission to protect those who are vulnerable, marginalized, or in poverty. Rather, the environmental crises both deepen and cause new forms of vulnerability and marginalization (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi, 2021). Furthermore, social work must deal with the possible negative consequences of environmental policies, such as rising energy poverty, for marginalized and vulnerable groups.

Ecosocial work strives to contribute to a profound and fair sustainability transition, as well as the widespread adoption of an ecosocial paradigm in social work and societies at large (Matthies and Närhi, 2017). Therefore, ecosocial work aspires to a deeper and transformative approach to sustainability in social work practice, including a critical evaluation of its own views of the world and subsequent reconfiguration of the place of humans within the natural world (Boetto *et al.*, 2020). The climate crisis and other life-threatening planetary scale environmental changes illustrate that human beings need to fundamentally reconfigure their relationship to planet Earth and its life forms. However, for modern social work, which stems largely from the same anthropocentric and modernist worldview as the current environmental problems, this presents a paradigmatic, and thus immense ontological, institutional, and practical challenge. Nonetheless, while still far from mainstream and not widely identified within the social work profession, recognition of and interest in ecosocial work has rapidly grown during the past two decades as a research area and theoretical development, having an increasing impact on education and practice developments (*ibid.*; Krings *et al.*, 2018; Matthies, Krings and Stamm, 2020; Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi, 2021).

The ecosocial framework has much in common with the critical, structural, indigenous, and feminist approaches in the field of social work, all of which carry a broad understanding of the person-in-environment concept and an interest in the dynamics of power (Coates, 2003; Coates and Gray, 2012; Närhi and Matthies, 2016). Moreover, they are linked with and contribute to currently evolving, interdisciplinary discussions on post-anthropocentric and posthuman (*e.g.*, Bozalek and Pease, 2021), as well as decolonizing social work (Clarke and Yellow Bird, 2021). Recognizing that even global change is made locally, the task of ecosocial work is to pursue a variety of locally meaningful pathways towards greater sustainability. In doing so, one of its priorities is to ensure that social work clients, and in general people with lesser resources and political and economic power, have both access to and a say over sustainable choices and lifestyles. In other words, sustainability and environmental justice can be considered as parallel and aligned principles of social work, together with human rights and social justice (see also Ife, 2018). Notwithstanding the clear need for a comprehensive systemic renewal, ecosocial work has heretofore proceeded mostly from within existing systems. Often, ecosocial work has meant promoting or downright organizing niches of fairer and more sustainable everyday practices, income earning possibilities, relationships, and well-being.

Ecosocial work identifies on a practical level, first, a strong link between social and environmental problems, because marginalized groups often suffer from both environmental and social injustice. Second, regarding solutions, the ecosocial framework brings the social and the environmental dimension together. This means, among other things, that nature can be seen as a resource that could be (re)discovered by social workers, for example, by recognizing and utilizing the healing power of the natural environment and animal companions, such as in various forms of nature and/or animal-assisted care. Moreover, various activities have been organized, for example, around re- and upcycling, to provide both sustainable income opportunities and to promote resource-sparing ways of life. Third, ecosocial work involves an obligation to social workers, together with their clients, to contribute to more sustainable societies, which can mean considering planetary well-being as a new goal of the profession (*cf.*, Stamm, 2021a). This proposed obligation can be identified independent of the social work approach. It can play a role in individual, clinical social work, in group-based or community approaches but also in structural or political social work aspiring for change at societal and policy levels (Boetto, 2017; Närhi and Matthies, 2018).

### **Planetary well-being and its relationship with the ecosocial paradigm in social work**

As a goal, planetary well-being overlaps in numerous ways with the objectives of ecosocial work. Emphasizing the integrity of the Earth system and ecosystem processes as the foundation of life, it brings together both social, humanistic, and natural scientific knowledge. In line with the concept of planetary well-being

(Kortetmäki *et al.*, 2021), proponents of ecosocial work often stipulate a shift from an anthropocentric worldview to an ecocentric (or simply ecosocial) one (*cf.*, Gray and Coates, 2012; Powers and Rinkel, 2019; Rambaree, Powers and Smith, 2019). Social work further relies heavily on needs theories and emphasizes their connections to human rights and social justice. The focus on systems and processes, inherent in the planetary well-being concept as a precondition for the satisfaction of needs, is also familiar to social work (*e.g.*, Hollstein-Brinkmann and Staub-Bernasconi, 2005). However, the focus usually remains on the individual person, and systems are often used to describe various aspects of the social environment of a social work client, such as the family system, the work life system or the cultural or religious system that a person is embedded in. Finally, the planetary well-being approach addresses the problem of global inequality, which is an important issue for social work globally. However, for the time being, social work is largely stuck in national frameworks that do not support and instead actually hinder global views and problem-solving (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2017, p. 115).

The overlap between the concept of planetary well-being and the ecosocial paradigm in social work is already manifested in the concept of well-being. The term is highlighted in the current global definition of the social work profession. The last sentence of this global focal point for social workers states: “Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and Indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance well-being” (IFSW and IASSW, 2014). As with the term environment, in social work the notion of well-being is mostly understood as human well-being, emphasizing human needs (Gamble, 2012). However, based on the assumption that well-being is a fundamentally important concept of social work, many scholars and advocates of the ecosocial paradigm have made attempts to further develop the understanding of well-being in social work (Peeters, 2016; Powers, Rinkel and Kumar, 2021). Peeters, for example, argues that in times of the ecological crisis the idea that well-being follows from high material prosperity must be revised. The emphasis should be on the quality of human relationships and the relationship with nature (Peeters, 2016, p. 178). Other scholars suggest the introduction of concepts such as holistic or mutual well-being, or “true well-being for the Web of Life” (Powers, Rinkel and Kumar, 2021, p. 5). To strive for holistic well-being in social work would mean to shift towards a non-anthropocentric, or ecocentric worldview (*cf.*, Rambaree, Powers and Smith, 2019). The guiding principle for such a worldview would be ecological justice, which seeks to preserve the integrity of the natural world, among other things, and ascribes to nonhuman nature an intrinsic value irrespective of its value for human beings (Gray *et al.*, 2013, p. 321). The underlying ethical principle is the equality of all living beings (Sterba, 2014).

The concept of environmental justice can be seen as subordinated or anthropocentric because it adheres to a human perspective, emphasizing distributional, representational, and procedural justice (*cf.*, Kivimaa *et al.*, 2021; Schlosberg, 2007). Environmental justice is a concept strongly connected to the US-American context,

where it originated in the Black civil rights movement. Later, it also incorporated other marginalized groups that faced both racism and environmental hazards at the same time (Krings and Copic, 2020). In the context of the climate crisis, environmental justice has been incorporated into the concept of climate justice. Given that the different effects of global warming on different countries and peoples are well documented, climate justice points to imbalances in bearing the brunt of the climate crisis both within and between nation states.

Globally, people living in poverty are commonly affected more harshly by the changing climate, with the impact of extreme weather conditions, such as heat waves or floods, as well as by climate change mitigation measures, such as increasing energy costs. In social work, increasing numbers of scholars insist on taking these effects more seriously and integrating them in assessments and the methods of social work practitioners. Both principles, environmental and ecological justice, follow the same direction but simultaneously deviate in some regards. Both go beyond the traditional notions of social justice in social work, which do not consider relations to the natural environment, and both ascribe an intrinsic value to the natural world. Combined with the principle of sustainability, environmental justice must also be widened (as intergenerational justice) to accommodate the needs and rights of future people (Stamm, 2021b).

In summary, the concept of planetary well-being and the ecosocial paradigm in social work share a lot of common ground. This includes a holistic view on well-being, which goes beyond human needs and seeks to achieve ecological justice. At least in theory, also global inequalities are highlighted in both approaches. The question of whose needs should be fulfilled individually to abolish inequalities among humans, while at the same time considering the well-being of other forms of life, remains open. These dilemmas are partly discussed in the next section.

### **Challenges in applying the planetary well-being concept in social work**

To apply the planetary well-being concept in social work would mean to reconsider social work ethics. In global social work statements on ethics, as well as in national codes of ethics in general, human rights and social justice are laid down as the main principles. In practice, however, much of the ethical deliberation focuses on worker–client relations in an implicitly national context (Ranta-Tyrkkö, 2017). The planetary well-being concept, as the more specific ecosocial paradigm, would stipulate to go beyond these traditional principles and values of social work, and to build bridges to the natural environment and recognize its value for social work. In environmental ethics, which the planetary well-being concept is partly based on, these two perspectives are identified as anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics (Boylan, 2014; Light and Rolston, 2003). For social work, as a human-centred profession and discipline, striking a balance between the (moral) anthropocentric and the non-anthropocentric perspectives seems crucial.

Sterba (2014) argues that a reconciliation between anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics is possible. His line of reasoning is of value also for social work and its connection to the planetary well-being concept. As a starting point, he acknowledges the intrinsic value of all species but he argues that in certain circumstances the value of human beings, or in other words the well-being of humans, can be prioritized. He introduces three principles that could be seen as common ground between the two described ethical perspectives, allowing a reconciliation between both:

- 1 A Principle of Human Defence: Actions that defend oneself and other human beings against harmful aggression are permissible even when they necessitate killing or harming animals or plants (Sterba, 2014, pp. 164–166).
- 2 A Principle of Human Preservation: Actions that are necessary for meeting one's basic needs or the basic needs of other human beings are permissible even when they require aggressing against the basic needs of animals and plants (*ibid.*).
- 3 A Principle of Disproportionality: Actions that meet nonbasic or luxury needs of humans are prohibited when they aggress against the basic needs of animals and plants (*ibid.*).

Even though his argumentation is challenged by other environmental ethics scholars (*cf.*, Steverson, 2014), it can serve as a starting point for a revised social work ethic that would still focus on human well-being but acknowledge the intrinsic value of the natural world as well. Regarding the third principle, there has been a related debate in social work theory (Staub-Bernasconi, 2018). Apart from the needs of animals and plants, an important question is what basic and luxury needs are. In social work this difference has also been discussed using the terms *needs* versus *wishes* (*ibid.*). Some scholars oppose the idea of any objective needs. Ife, for example, suggests that needs are “by their very nature, value-laden” (Ife, 2012, p. 126). They depend, according to Ife, to a great extent on individual views of the clients of social work as well as on the values of social workers themselves. Without having the space to elaborate the theoretical foundations and standpoints of the debate here, it could be concluded based on Sterba's argumentation that social work would, in the future, not only have to differentiate between basic and luxury needs of humans but would have to consider the needs of the natural world as well (where only basic needs exist). Notably, in the planetary well-being framework, only basic needs are referred to as needs.

Taking the position that the needs of the natural world could be allowed to be subordinated only if basic human needs are at stake could pave the way for a critical anthropocentrism in social work (Grunwald, 2016). The task of reconciliation between (moral) anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric ethics can also be used for linking environmental and ecological justice. On a general level, both concept-pairs share a common ground. We argue that for social work theory and social work ethics a better understanding of these concepts and their overlap is needed.



This could then serve as a basis for discussions on the concrete implications of the planetary well-being concept for social work.

The implications or challenges for social work practice are manifold. First, it must be stated that social workers take action based on certain mandates. Traditionally, the common understanding was that of a double mandate between support and control: One by the state, which was associated with the term *control*, and the second one coming from the clients, which represented *support*. Social workers in this respect had to balance and handle tensions between the two tasks—supporting and controlling. Swiss social work scholar, Staub-Bernasconi, has added a third mandate to these. She argues for a self-given, professional mandate that is based on both social work's scientific knowledge base and an ethical foundation. The latter consists mainly of social work's main principles of human rights and social justice and is broadly laid down in international and national ethic statements and codes (Staub-Bernasconi, 2016, 2018). In recent years, an extension or adjustment of the third mandate, to include the natural environment and sustainability goals, has been suggested (Stamm, 2021b). However, a direct mandate from plants or animals cannot be given. All three mandates might only implicitly include a consideration of the intrinsic value of the nonhuman nature. To date, however, this component has been rarely discussed.

While some social work codes of ethics already mention environmental justice as a principle, the concept as such is left undefined and without operationalizing for social work practice. This makes it hard for social workers in the current situation to know what they could or should do in regard to environmental justice or promoting the well-being of nonhuman nature. Moreover, as they are trained to consider human well-being, knowledge about other species or the natural environment is usually not part of their education. When some social workers or social work organizations nonetheless pay attention to the natural environment, the reasoning behind this is usually that it is integral to the social environment of the clients. The above notwithstanding, many social workers, professional and non-professional, are very likely to be concerned with the well-being of nonhuman nature but lack knowledge of how to take it into account and promote it in their own work (Ranta-Tyrkkö and Närhi, 2021).

Part of a classical social work diagnosis is an assessment phase, in which a problem is identified together with the clients. Such an assessment can have different components, such as looking at the needs, rights, and resources of clients (*cf.*, Arnegger, 2005). Based on the assessment, generally certain goals are set, linked with methods to achieve them. In individualized forms of social work, the natural environment might play a role, but only when it comes to environmental hazards or amenities. This can mean a combined form of social and environmental or ecological justice from the perspective of individual problems.

Regarding the above-mentioned principle of disproportionality, in most cases the needs of social work clients can be considered basic needs. However, the implementation of the planetary well-being concept might be more likely to be

successful in social work on the community level or in structural social work. Here, planetary processes and systems can be considered when assessing problems and possible solutions. This could also include the life situation of more affluent people, who might overconsume natural resources and who are usually not considered representatives of social work clients. In a community, such as a village, small city, or neighbourhood, it is common to balance different needs and interests of various individuals or groups. Moreover, it would be possible to combine social work on the community level with a consideration of the needs of nonhuman species. For example, an animal population which might be “part” of the community, as well as the ecosystem in a broader sense.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we introduced social work as an academic discipline and a research-based, practice-oriented profession and as part of social movements. During the last 20 years the rise of a new ecosocial paradigm has evolved in social work. It coincides in many aspects with the concept of planetary well-being and it can be used as another reference point to highlight the interconnectiveness between human beings, other species and the ecosystem of planet earth. It can further remind social workers not only to consider and differentiate between basic needs and wishes (of people living today and in the future), but also to pay attention to the needs of nonhuman life on earth. Social work cannot remain on the more abstract level of systems and processes only, because it is involved in the daily lives of individuals, families, and groups and their social problems, a situation which makes such a holistic view an immense challenge. In terms of environmental ethics, it might mean striking a balance between (moral or critical) anthropocentric and non-anthropocentric viewpoints. Though the concept of planetary well-being has its limits, it is a useful steppingstone for social work to use for looking beyond traditional ethics and practices. It can help social workers and their clients to reconsider their role regarding the well-being of other species and entire ecosystems.

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