

**This is a self-archived version of an original article. This version may differ from the original in pagination and typographic details.**

**Author(s):** Nöjd, Taija; Boetto, Heather; Bowles, Wendy; Närhi, Kati; Cordoba, Pushkar Sebastian; Ramsay, Sylvia; Shephard, Monique; Kannasoja, Sirpa

**Title:** Perspectives of Ecosocial Practice in Human Services : An International Comparison between Finland and Australia

**Year:** 2024

**Version:** Published version

**Copyright:** © The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The Briti:









**Rights:** CC BY 4.0

**Rights url:** <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

**Please cite the original version:**

Nöjd, T., Boetto, H., Bowles, W., Närhi, K., Cordoba, P. S., Ramsay, S., Shephard, M., & Kannasoja, S. (2024). Perspectives of Ecosocial Practice in Human Services : An International Comparison between Finland and Australia. *British Journal of Social Work*, Early online. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae135>

# Perspectives of Ecosocial Practice in Human Services: An International Comparison between Finland and Australia

Taija Nöjd <sup>1,\*</sup>, Heather Boetto <sup>2</sup>, Wendy Bowles <sup>2</sup>,  
Kati Närhi <sup>1</sup>, Pushkar Sebastian Cordoba <sup>3</sup>,  
Sylvia Ramsay <sup>2</sup>, Monique Shephard <sup>4</sup> and  
Sirpa Kannasoja <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, PL 35, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland

<sup>2</sup>School of Social Work and Arts, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia

<sup>3</sup>School of Global, Urban and Social Studies, RMIT University, Melbourne, Victoria 3000, Australia

<sup>4</sup>Faculty of Arts and Education, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW 2678, Australia

\*Correspondence to Taija Nöjd, Department of Social Sciences and Philosophy, University of Jyväskylä, PL 35, 40014 Jyväskylän yliopisto, Finland. E-mail: taija.k.nojd@student.jyu.fi

## Abstract

This article reports on research in Finland and Australia exploring the similarities and differences between Finnish and Australian human service professionals' perspectives about ecosocial practice. Surveys consisting of quantitative questions were conducted in both countries, recruiting 542 Finnish participants and 277 Australian participants. Data from each country were analysed descriptively using SPSS software, and the results were compared. Findings indicated that participants in both countries believed that the natural environment and climate change are important at a personal level. However, differences emerged between countries at the professional level, with a higher proportion of Australian participants connecting environmental concerns with human services. Higher proportions of Australian participants also reported adverse

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

impacts of climate change on the well-being of clients or service users. Similarly, Australian participants engaged with clients about ecosocial matters more often. In both countries, participants experienced a lack of support from organisations to facilitate ecosocial practice. These results indicate that, in Australia, a region particularly prone to environmental disasters, participants were more actively engaged in ecosocial practice. Regardless of the different social service systems, the need to challenge neo-liberalism through structural reform within organisational, professional and policy domains is essential for enabling ecosocial practice.

**Keywords:** ecological social work, ecosocial practice, ecosocial work, green social work, social work practice, sustainability

*Accepted: July 2024*

## Introduction

Social work, a profession committed to social justice and human rights, is increasingly concerned with the unfolding equity and justice issues associated with the environmental crisis. Whilst this crisis affects everyone, it is well-established that climate change causes disproportionate and cumulative impacts on disadvantaged regions and communities (Islam and Winkel, 2017). Climate change refers to the increase in greenhouse gas emissions, which is causing unprecedented rises in temperature trends, resulting in changes to typical climate patterns (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2022). These changes to the climate system are causing an increase in the frequency and intensity of extreme weather events and natural disasters (United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction [UNDRR], 2015), as well as large-scale biodiversity loss, displaced populations and increased conflict over scarce resources (IPCC, 2022). Further, a growing world population, coupled with increasing demand for energy consumption and a reliance on economic growth for prosperity, driven by neoliberalism, exacerbates an already complex and multilayered climate context. Social work's contribution towards promoting sustainable development is therefore crucial for alleviating environmental and social inequities caused by climate change (Cordoba and Bando, 2021). This article reports on part of a larger study exploring the similarities and differences between Australian and Finnish human service professionals' perspectives on ecosocial practice. Previous publications have focused on national findings from each country (Nöjd *et al.*, 2023; Boetto *et al.*, 2024; Nöjd *et al.*, 2024). It is hoped that the findings from this research will inform the development of ecosocial practice and improve understanding across international contexts.

## Ecosocial practice in social work

Ecosocial practice aims to help people create and maintain a healthy, sustainable and biodiverse ecosystem for all living organisms (Boetto, 2017). It recognises that human and environmental well-being are interdependent (Boetto, 2017) and is concerned with injustices caused by an unfair distribution of environmental resources and risks (Kuir-Ayius and Marena, 2019). Various terms have been adopted within social work to denote this growing emphasis on the natural environment, including an ecosocial approach in social work (Närhi and Matthies, 2001), green social work (Dominelli, 2012), ecological social work (McKinnon and Alston, 2016) and environmental social work (Ramsay and Boddy, 2017). For the purposes of this article, the term 'ecosocial practice' is adopted for its interdisciplinary application within the human services sector.

From a critical perspective, ecosocial practice is often challenged by dominant modernist discourses that pervade society and the context of social work practice (Boetto, 2019; Bell, 2023). These dominant discourses include neoliberalism, which is a market-based ideology centred on capitalism, privatisation, competition and a reduction in government spending (Wallace and Pease, 2011; Kokkonen *et al.*, 2018; Fremstad and Paul, 2022). Neoliberalism has been critiqued for contributing to environmental degradation and climate change through the unsustainable production and consumption of Earth's natural resources within a perpetual growth model (Powers *et al.*, 2019). According to several authors (e.g. Coates, 2003; Boetto, 2017; Matthies *et al.*, 2020), social work has sustained neoliberalism through its co-dependency with the welfare state to alleviate poverty and subsequent efforts to help people adapt to a society underpinned by values of individualism and consumerism. This primary pursuit of human development inadvertently contributes to climate change and is at odds with ecosocial practice. Social work researchers in both Finland (Kokkonen *et al.*, 2018) and Australia have critiqued the influence of neoliberalism in preventing the adoption of ecosocial practice strategies in human services (Boetto *et al.*, 2024).

Nevertheless, an important period of transition is taking place within the profession to realise social work's potential for transformative ecosocial change. Boetto's (2017) 'transformative ecosocial model' proposes a congruent philosophical base across ontological (being), epistemological (thinking) and methodological (doing) dimensions of practice emphasising holism and interdependence with the natural world. In their edited book, Bozalek and Pease (2021) critique anthropocentric views in social work and draw attention to the ontological change needed to re-develop the philosophical base of practice. Further, the profession's active contribution towards repairing biodiverse ecosystems and mitigating the impacts of climate change has been endorsed by the International

Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) recent policy position supporting social work's role in co-building a new ecosocial world (IFSW, 2022). A central tenet of this policy is a holistic rights framework inclusive of the natural environment, and a subsequent call for social workers to adopt ecosocial practice to promote sustainable development. In addition, the profession's commitment to global sustainable development policies, such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (United Nations, 2015), has been ratified in professional IFSW policy (IFSW, 2021). This transition within the profession establishes a foundation and sanctioned requirement for social workers to practice in an environmentally conscious way.

### Research into ecosocial practice

Previous studies examining ecosocial practice suggest a longstanding personal and professional interest in the natural environment and climate change. Over two decades ago, Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) undertook questionnaires with 113 social workers from South Africa and the USA about the integration of the natural environment into professional practice. In both countries, approximately 93 per cent of social workers reported that environmental issues were personally important, and 71 per cent reported that environmental issues were important to the profession. Yet, despite recognition of the importance of environmental issues, less than half (46 per cent) incorporated environmental issues into professional practice.

Further surveys have been undertaken in the USA to explore social worker beliefs and attitudes about the natural environment and climate change. Nesmith and Smyth (2015) conducted a survey with 373 social workers about environmental justice and ecosocial work education. Seventy-one per cent of social workers reported that clients or service users were experiencing environmental injustices, particularly regarding poor access to healthy food, unsafe play spaces, air pollution and extreme weather events. Although most practitioners identified a gap in their knowledge about how to implement ecosocial practice interventions, a range of ideas for action, including community organising, training and advocacy were identified (Nesmith and Smyth, 2015). More recently, Allen (2020) surveyed 159 social workers about the impacts of climate change on clients in the USA. Findings revealed that almost 90 per cent of social workers believed climate change is taking place, and over 68 per cent believed that climate change is a medium to large threat for clients (Allen, 2020).

Qualitative studies have also explored ecosocial practice. For example, a study by Matthies *et al.* (2020) identified organisations that provide innovative grassroots ecosocial services in Belgium, Germany, Italy and

Finland. These organisations adopted alternative economic frameworks based on degrowth principles, which the researchers contend provide collaborative ecosocial practice opportunities for social work (Matthies *et al.*, 2020). Another study engaged social work and human service workers in ‘communities of practice’ to collaboratively explore ecosocial practice interventions in Australia and Finland (Boetto *et al.*, 2022). This study found that ‘communities of practice’ enhanced the development of ecosocial practice interventions and further identified organisations as the greatest barrier to implementing ecosocial interventions in both countries. Whilst both Finnish and Australian participants identified a lack of resources and time as major organisational barriers, Australian participants additionally identified factors related to restrictive organisational contracts and funding requirements, one of the consequences of a neoliberal approach to service delivery.

### The Australian and Finnish context

Building on these studies, this article reports on surveys undertaken with human service professionals in Finland and Australia. Whilst Finland’s population is approximately one-quarter of Australia’s (World Bank, 2022), both Finland and Australia are industrialised, highly urbanised countries, yet there are significant differences in their social service systems. The Finnish social service system is characterised by extensive public funding. Services are provided by twenty-one well-being services counties, plus the city of Helsinki, and the Ahvenanmaa region that operate according to the life-cycle model, including services for families with children, adults and the elderly. These counties also offer services in areas such as disability, mental health and addictions (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2023). In contrast, the Australian social service system is funded by both the public and private sectors. Most services are delivered by non-government organisations in a range of contexts, receiving both public and private funding, including community health, income security, child and family support, drug and alcohol and disability.

This study uses the term ‘human service’ professionals to accommodate the diverse ways ‘social work’, ‘human service’, ‘social service’ and ‘social welfare’ professionals are defined in each country. In Finland, most human service professionals are social welfare professionals holding bachelor’s degrees in social services, rehabilitation or gerontology, whilst a smaller group are social workers and hold a master’s degree in social work or an equal qualification. In 2022, there were a total of 47,097 licensed social welfare professionals aged under sixty-five years: 39,441 licensed professionals with a bachelor’s degree in social services, rehabilitation or gerontology, and 7,656 licensed qualified social workers,

keeping in mind that professionals holding more than one degree can be included in both categories ([Avoindata.fi](https://avoindata.fi), 2023). In contrast, in Australia, where social work and social welfare professionals are not registered, and social workers are one of the largest professional groups in the human service workforce (an estimated 35,000), compared to social welfare workers (an estimated 20,000) ([Labour Market Insights](#), 2023). The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) accredits social work programmes at both bachelor's and master's levels, and eligibility for membership of the AASW determines whether a person is social work qualified.

In relation to the natural environment and environmental sustainability, Finland has performed well against international benchmarks measuring sustainable development. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Index ranks Finland first in the world for progress towards achieving the SDGs ([Sachs et al.](#), 2023). According to this report, Finland has achieved three out of seventeen SDGs: goals 1 (no poverty), 4 (quality education) and 7 (affordable and clean energy). Despite these achievements, Finland faces major challenges in addressing goal thirteen (climate action) ([Sachs et al.](#), 2023, p. 202). In contrast, Australia is ranked 40th in the world for progress towards achieving the United Nations SDGs, falling from 18th place in 2015 ([Sachs et al.](#), 2023). According to this report, Australia has not yet achieved any of the SDG goals and faces major challenges addressing four goals: 2 (zero hunger), 12 (resource consumption and production), 13 (climate action) and 15 (life on land) ([Sachs et al.](#), 2023, p. 100). Further, on a per capita basis, Australians produced 22.4 tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions in 2018, which is double that of Finland's 10.3 tonnes ([OECD](#), 2021a,b). These outcomes highlight Finland's achievements compared to Australia in promoting sustainable development. Given that Australia is in the Asia-Pacific region, the most disaster-prone region in the world ([United Nations Development Program \[UNDP\]](#), 2019), it is of serious concern that Australia is performing so poorly.

## Methodology

### Research design

This article reports on the research question: 'What are the similarities and differences between Australian and Finnish human service professionals' perspectives about ecosocial practice?' The original survey was created by the Finnish authors in co-operation with the Talentia Board of Professional Ethics, the main body responsible for formulating the ethical guidelines for social work in Finland ([Nöjd et al.](#), 2023). The framework used for conceptualising the survey was based on [Boetto's \(2017\)](#)

transformative ecosocial work model, described above. Key aspects of this model were incorporated into the survey, including personal and professional levels of practice. For the Australian study, the Finnish survey was translated into English and, in some parts, adapted to fit the Australian idiom and context. For example, climate conditions listed in the Australian survey were modified to exclude snowless winters and include drought and bushfires.

## The surveys

The online surveys were conducted in each country and consisted of both quantitative (scaled) and qualitative (open-ended) questions. This article reports on comparable quantitative results. Topics covered in the surveys included personal ecosocial beliefs and behaviours, perceptions of the relationship between social work and environmental issues, impacts of environmental issues on client well-being, professional ecosocial engagement and organisational ecosocial engagement. The questions mapped, for example, the personal importance of addressing environmental issues, the perceived importance of addressing environmental issues in social work, perceptions on which environmental issues affect client well-being, the frequency of ecosocial practice and perceptions of organisational support for ecosocial practice. Background information, such as gender, age and level of education, was also collected. Participants in both countries were asked to respond to two kinds of 5-point Likert scaled questions: one on the 'agree–disagree' continuum and the other on a frequency-based scale ranging from 'always' to 'never'. Finnish participants were also asked to respond to yes/no questions. Whilst all Finnish participants were required to complete all questions in the survey, Australian participants were able to partially complete the survey. This means that, in the Australian data, the number of participants answering each question varied. Therefore, frequencies are based on the non-missing values and valid percentages are reported for Australian data.

Both the Finnish survey (Nöjd *et al.*, 2023, 2024) and the Australian survey (Boetto *et al.*, 2024) were piloted. Researchers in each country adhered to their university's guidelines for conducting ethical research. Ethics approval was granted for the Australian study by the relevant university human research ethics committee at Charles Sturt University (Protocol no. H22038). The Finnish study was granted a statement from the Ethics Committee of the University of Jyväskylä that an ethical review was not required. Information about the research's purpose, confidentiality and voluntary participation was provided as part of seeking participant's consent.



## Recruitment

Recruitment of participants occurred via purposive and snowball sampling (Alston and Bowles, 2018). In Finland, an email invitation was sent by the Finnish Talentia trade union to its 12,000 members working in the human services sector. The Australian survey invitation was sent through multiple online channels to professional networks (social work, psychology, counselling), large employing organisations, as well as university networks of practitioners, academics, students and alumni, reflecting Australia's dual public and private human services system. Australian recipients were encouraged to send the invitation on to other human service professionals.

The Finnish survey was conducted online for three weeks in November 2020 via an open link using the Webropol tool provided by the University of Jyväskylä. The Australian survey was open for three months, commencing April 2022 via the online Survey Monkey tool provided through Charles Sturt University.

## Participant details

In Finland, a total of 542 human service professionals participated in the survey, and 277 human service professionals participated in the Australian survey. The response rate in Finland was 4.5 per cent. The response rate could not be determined in Australia because the total population of human service professionals is not known. For both countries, it can be concluded that the samples were not representative. Given that self-selecting, voluntary participation is known to be associated with bias (Moore *et al.*, 2017), it is likely that Finnish and Australian participants were interested in the natural environment and climate change. Further information outlining the details of participants in both countries is provided below.

### *Type of human service professions*

In Finland, the two largest groups of participants were qualified social welfare professionals with a bachelor's degree in social services, gerontology or rehabilitation as their highest degree, representing approximately two-thirds of participants ( $n=328$ , 61 per cent), and qualified social workers with a master's degree in social work or equal, representing almost one-third of participants ( $n=170$ , 31 per cent). Forty-eight of the qualified social workers also had a bachelor's degree but are regarded as social workers in this study. Forty-four participants had completed other degrees.

**Table 1.** Years of experience in human services.

Years of experience in human services	Australian		Finnish	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
<1	29	11	7	1
1–5	61	24	107	20
6–15	81	31	204	38
16+	88	34	224	41
Total valid responses	265	100	542	100

In Australia, the breakdown between human service professionals cannot be identified via the level of qualification because social welfare and social work professionals may each have bachelor's or master's degrees. Instead, data from other survey questions were used to identify professional backgrounds of Australian participants. Like the Finnish group, the Australian participants included a range of human service professionals although, in contrast to the Finnish group, the majority were social workers as measured by eligibility for membership of the AASW. Of the valid responses ( $N=267$ ) to the question about AASW eligibility for membership, over two-thirds of the Australian participants were social workers ( $n=204$ , 76 per cent). These social work participants were either graduated social workers ( $n=88$ ) or social work students who were currently working in the human services sector ( $n=116$ ). Other Australian human service professionals ( $n=63$ , 24 per cent) included psychologists, community workers, educators and counsellors. The professional breakdown of the remaining participants is represented as non-valid responses ( $n=10$ ) and is therefore unknown.

### *Years of experience in human services*

In relation to years of experience in human services, a higher proportion of Finnish participants had more than five years' experience (79 per cent) compared to Australian participants (65 per cent). A greater proportion of Australian participants had fewer than one year's experience (11 per cent) compared to Finnish participants (1 per cent) (Table 1). However, 62 per cent of Australian participants engaged in leadership, supervision or management, whereas only 27 per cent of Finnish participants had supervisory or managerial tasks, including those who conducted these tasks intermittently, for example in substitute roles.

### *Areas of practice*

Participants in each country also indicated the areas in which they practised. Finnish participants worked in various areas with different client groups, including health care, education and youth work in addition to

the different fields within social welfare. Similarly, Australian participants had practised in a range of areas, with children and young people, mental health, disability, community work, education, family and domestic violence and trauma being the most prevalent.

### *Organisation type*

Reflecting the differences in each country's social service systems, 46 per cent of Australian participants worked in non-government organisations, compared to 10 per cent of Finnish participants, whereas 70 per cent of Finnish participants worked in the public sector, compared to 28 per cent of Australian participants.

### **Data analysis**

Researchers in each country initially analysed their data separately using SPSS software and later combined findings for comparative purposes. To compare findings meaningfully between countries, responses to scaled questions were collapsed into three points: 'disagree—neither agree or disagree—agree' and 'rarely or never—sometimes—often' and then compared descriptively. In relation to one set of questions about the negative impacts of climate change on client well-being, the Finnish survey asked for a yes/no response and Australian-scaled responses were matched accordingly with positive responses categorised as 'yes' and negative responses categorised as 'no'. Valid percentages are reported for the Australian data as not all participants were required to answer every question.

## **Results**

Results are reported according to the survey topics: personal ecosocial beliefs; impacts of climate change on client well-being; professional ecosocial engagement; and organisational ecosocial engagement.

### **Personal ecosocial beliefs**

Participants were asked to respond to a series of statements about their personal beliefs relating to the natural environment and climate change. Overall, participants in both countries agreed with statements about the importance of environmental problems; however, clear differences emerged between countries about statements that connected environmental problems to human services (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Relative proportion of participant responses relating to beliefs about environmental problems.

	Agree %		Neutral %		Disagree %	
	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN
<b>General beliefs about environmental problems</b>						
It is important to reduce problems that impact the natural environment.	98	99	1	0	1	1
The well-being of the natural environment is personally important to me.	97	99	1	1	2	0
It is important to take action on climate change.	97	98	1	1	2	1
<b>Beliefs about environmental problems in human services</b>						
Social problems and environmental problems are interrelated.	92	54	5	25	3	21
Environmental problems and climate change negatively impact the well-being of clients.	93	69	7	19	0	12
It is important that human service/social welfare professionals engage in action to address environmental problems.	90	78	8	17	2	5

<sup>a</sup>The total number of Australian participants varied from 236 to 249 for these scales, whilst the total number of Finnish participants was 542.

### *Beliefs about environmental problems*

Almost all participants in both countries strongly agreed the natural environment is important (Table 2), with high responses relating to the importance of reducing problems that impact the natural environment (Finland, 99 per cent; Australia, 98 per cent), personal concern for the well-being of the natural environment (Finland, 99 per cent; Australia, 97 per cent) and the importance of taking action on climate change (Finland, 98 per cent; Australia, 97 per cent).

### *Beliefs about environmental problems in human services*

Agreement by Australian participants remained high for statements connecting environmental problems with human services, whilst proportionately fewer Finnish participants agreed (Table 2). The largest gap between Finnish and Australian participants related to the belief that social and environmental problems are interrelated (Finland, 54 per cent; Australia, 92 per cent), followed by the belief that environmental problems and climate change negatively impact the well-being of clients (Finland, 69 per cent; Australia, 93 per cent).

### *Impacts of climate change on client well-being*

Participants were presented with a list of environmental issues and asked to indicate whether these impacted on client well-being. Whilst all environmental issues listed were regarded by some participants in both countries

**Table 3.** Relative proportion of participant responses about the negative impacts of climate change on client well-being.

Statement	%	
	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN
Storms/stormy weather becoming more common	98	23
Heatwaves/hot weather becoming more common	95	38
Floods/flooding becoming more common	95	9
Chemicals and pesticides/environmental pollution or chemicalisation	93	30
Anxiety about damage to the natural environment/anxiety related to environmental problems	92	58
Poor/weakening air quality	88	35
Harm caused by transport	87	38
Poor/weakening water quality in water bodies	87	26
Population density/concentrations of population in certain areas	80	61
Re-location and immigration caused by climate change	75	30
Lack of nearby green space/loss and monotonousness of nearby green space	74	46

<sup>a</sup>The total number of Australian participants varied from 224 to 226 for these scales, whilst the total number of Finnish participants was 542.

as impacting client well-being, a clear difference was apparent, with higher rates of agreement from Australian participants across all environmental issues (Table 3). The highest responses by Australian participants were in relation to natural disasters, including storms (Australia, 98 per cent; Finland, 23 per cent), heatwaves (Australia, 95 per cent; Finland, 38 per cent) and floods (Australia, 95 per cent; Finland, 9 per cent). Amongst the Finnish participants, the highest levels of agreement were in relation to the concentration of population in certain areas (Finland, 61 per cent, Australia, 80 per cent), anxiety related to environmental problems (Finland, 58 per cent; Australia, 92 per cent) and lack of nearby green space (Finland, 46 per cent; Australia, 74 per cent). Despite these relatively high rates of agreement by Finnish participants, Australian rates for these environmental issues were still markedly higher.

### Professional ecosocial engagement

Participants were asked to indicate whether they talk to clients about environmental issues, including the importance of nature and animals in their life, environmentally friendly living practices (e.g. recycling and reusing), and economic sustainability (e.g. thrifty alternatives). Participants were also asked whether they incorporated outdoor space and animal-facilitated approaches into practice. Overall, higher rates of Australian participants reported talking with clients across all environmental issues (Table 4).

As a way of summarising the comparative responses from each country to the three statements regarding talking to service users, findings

**Table 4.** Relative proportion of participant responses regarding level of professional ecosocial engagement with clients.

Statement	Always/Often %		Sometimes %		Rarely/Never %	
	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN
I talk with clients regarding the significance of nature or animals in their life.	56	32	30	41	14	26
I talk with clients regarding environmentally friendly choices, for example recycling.	30	28	32	37	38	35
I talk with clients regarding economic sustainability.	46	23	30	34	24	43
I incorporate the natural environment and/or outdoor space into my work with clients.	48	35	29	28	23	37
I incorporate animal-facilitated approaches in my work.	19	9	26	19	55	72

<sup>a</sup>The total number of Australian participants varied from 200 to 210 for these scales, whilst the total number of Finnish participants varied from 413 to 487, as there was also a possibility to choose 'not applicable in my work'. These are not included in the percentages in Table 4.

were averaged across the range of 'always/often' to 'rarely/never'. When talking to clients about environmental issues 44 per cent of Australians always or often discussed economic sustainability, environmentally friendly choices and the significance of nature or animals in their life, compared to an average of 28 per cent of Finnish participants. Similarly, higher proportions of Australian participants than Finnish participants always or often incorporated the natural environment and outdoor space (Australia, 48 per cent; Finland, 35 per cent) and animal-facilitated approaches (Australia, 19 per cent; Finland, 9 per cent) into their work with clients.

## Organisational ecosocial engagement

Participants were asked to respond to a series of statements about organisational policies and practices that support ecosocial practice. Overall, similar proportions of participants in both countries reported that their organisations have policies that consider the natural environment. Most participants indicated that their organisations were not supportive (Table 5).

### Organisational policies

Approximately one in three participants in both countries were aware of an environmental policy in their organisation (Finland, 28 per cent; Australia, 36 per cent). However, when combining the not sure and

**Table 5.** Relative proportion of participant responses about organisational practices relating to the natural environment.

Statement	Agree %		Neutral %		Disagree %	
	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN	AUS <sup>a</sup>	FIN
In my organisation there is interest in ecosocial practice.	52	42	32	25	16	33
Developing ecosocial practice is supported by my organisation's management.	47	28	33	33	20	39
COVID-19 has prompted discussion in my organisation about the relationship between humans and the natural environment.	38	34	27	24	35	42
In my organisation there is enough information about environmental problems to operate in an environmentally-friendly way.	28	35	38	21	34	44

<sup>a</sup>The total number of Australian participants varied from 219 to 222 for these scales, whilst the total number of Finnish participants was 542.

disagree responses, more than half of the participants in both countries indicated there was no policy, or they did not know if there was any policy (Australia, 64 per cent; Finland, 72 per cent).

### *Organisational practices*

Although 52 per cent of Australian and 42 per cent of Finnish participants believed their organisation is interested in ecosocial practice, less than half of participants in both countries believed their organisations were supportive across all other statements (Table 5). Whereas a higher proportion of Australian participants believed organisational management is supportive of ecosocial practice (Australia, 47 per cent; Finland, 28 per cent), this pattern was reversed in relation to perceptions of organisational information about environmental problems to enable working in an environmental-friendly way (Australia, 28 per cent; Finland, 35 per cent). Comparably low proportions of participants from each country believed that the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic had prompted discussion about the relationship between humans and the natural environment (Australia, 38 per cent; Finland, 34 per cent).

## **Discussion**

This article explored the similarities and differences between Australian and Finnish human service professionals' perspectives about ecosocial practice. This is the first study of its kind for both countries, and the first international comparative analysis about human service professionals'

attitudes to the natural environment and climate change for over twenty years (Marlow and Van Rooyen, 2001). Findings from this study indicated that nearly all participants in Australia and Finland prioritised the well-being of the natural environment and taking climate action at a personal level. However, ecosocial practice at the professional level was not common in either country. These findings are similar to those of Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001), who surveyed social workers in the USA and South Africa and found that, despite 71 per cent of participants claiming that environmental issues were important to the social work profession, less than half reported that they incorporated environmental issues in their professional practice. Although Marlow and Van Rooyen's research was undertaken in different countries from this study, it nevertheless suggests that there has been little change in the prevalence of professional ecosocial practice over the past twenty years.

There are two possible factors influencing these findings of low levels of ecosocial practice. First, despite Finland ranking first in the world in achieving SDGs overall, the most recent United Nations Index (Sachs *et al.*, 2023) identifies that both Australia and Finland face major challenges in achieving Goal 13—climate action. This goal calls for government intervention to reduce climate change impacts through adaptation and disaster risk reduction policies, national education programmes and the provision of financial support to developing countries (United Nations, 2015). Secondly, it has been discussed that neoliberalism is dominant in both Finland (Kokkonen *et al.*, 2018) and Australia (Wallace and Pease, 2011; Boetto *et al.*, 2024), creating barriers for the profession as it endeavours to make an ecosocial transition away from its modernist roots (IFSW, 2022). In contrast to modernism, an ecosocial approach would involve a focus on the interdependence between human and environmental well-being and sustainability of the natural environment (Boetto, 2019; Bozalek and Pease, 2021; Bell, 2023).

Whilst levels of ecosocial practice were low in both countries, this study revealed some interesting differences between Finland and Australia. A higher proportion of Australian than Finnish participants practised from an ecosocial perspective. Similarly, higher proportions of Australian participants believed that social and environmental problems are related and that environmental problems and climate change impact negatively on the well-being of clients. It is possible that these differences between the Finnish and Australian participants could be due to the extent and visibility of environmental problems and impacts of climate change in everyday life in Australia compared to Finland, as noted earlier (UNDP, 2019). The prevalence of severe natural disasters in Australia, which has long been acknowledged as a key part of social work practice there (Stehlik, 2013), may have compelled the human services sector to take some account of the environment. In comparison, Finland's environmental problems might be less visible in people's



everyday lives, and therefore also less visible in the lives of human service professionals and clients. Nevertheless, in both countries, the effects of climate and environmental crises weaken the position of people in vulnerable situations, and therefore deepen social divides ([Islam and Winkel, 2017](#)).

Overall, findings relating to perceived organisational support for ecosocial practice were ambivalent in both countries. For example, whilst almost one-third of Australian participants agreed that their organisation had information about environmental practice to enable ecosocial practice, just over one-third disagreed. Similarly, whilst approximately two-fifths of Finnish participants agreed that their organisations were interested in ecosocial practice, just over one-third disagreed. Despite this, Finnish participants less often agreed that their organisations were supportive of ecosocial practice compared to Australian participants. These results are reflected in three out of four statements, where Australian participants more often agreed that their organisations were supportive of ecosocial practice. These outcomes suggest that, whilst on the one hand participants perceived their organisations to be supportive, there were many participants who did not. These findings support previous qualitative research comparing Australian and Finnish ecosocial practice, where organisations were identified as a major influence, both as an enabler and a barrier ([Boetto et al., 2020, 2022](#)).

Findings from this study support previous literature arguing for transformative change to the conventional philosophical base of practice shaped by dominant modernist discourses, including neoliberalism ([Boetto, 2019](#); [Bozalek and Pease, 2021](#); [Bell, 2023](#)). Examining the findings in light of [Boetto's \(2017\)](#) 'transformative ecosocial model' that aims to disrupt modernist assumptions, it seems that across both countries the natural environment may be important at the personal level (being), but general professional knowledge and values (thinking), especially from the organisational perspective, do not reflect an ecosocial approach. Neither does the current practice of the participants embody ecosocial practice (doing). These findings support [Thysell and Cuadra's \(2022\)](#) critical analysis of ecosocial practice, indicating that whilst there may be a desire to consider the natural environment in practice, it is difficult to realise due to the human-centric focus of social work. These findings may further suggest that transformative change in social work is in its infancy. Having captured the imaginations of human service professionals, it is yet to be embedded in organisational and professional practice, revealing the power of the profession's modernist origins ([Boetto, 2019](#); [Bell, 2023](#)). Fundamental structural reform within organisational, professional and policy domains is needed to enable practitioners to undertake ecosocial practice ([Powers et al., 2019](#); [Matthies et al., 2020](#)). This structural reform will begin to address the incongruity between ecosocial practice and modernism.

### *Limitations*

As an international comparative study, there were many limitations to this research. Perhaps the strongest limitation related to the challenges associated with cross-cultural research, including language translation and differences between each country's social welfare systems. Although the surveys were modified to better suit the social work context in both countries, the translation and modification of the concepts and claims challenged comparison of the survey results. These included: the dissimilar participants of the surveys in terms of their profession; the differing service systems in each country; and the slightly differing scales used. It is important to note, however, that ecosocial practice requires recognising distinct social work contexts (Erhard *et al.*, 2021). In addition, given the sampling bias in both countries involving voluntary self-selection, participants likely held an interest in ecosocial practice, thereby impacting research validity. Also, the international contexts of Australia and Finland as highly industrialised countries mean that the results are not generalisable. They can only be applied to other similar highly industrialised countries and contexts.

### *Implications of the study*

This study has implications for future social work policy, education and research. The profession needs to recognise justice and human rights issues associated with the environmental crisis, break away from the influences of neoliberalism, and engage in more critical and transformational practice. It is important that social work commits to promoting sustainable development to alleviate social and environmental inequities. National associations, policymakers, organisations and educational institutions have a responsibility to implement international ecosocial standards (IFSW, 2022) and embed sustainability into policy strategy and curriculum with sufficient resources. Based on the results of the survey, it is important that social work education provides tools to better understand and recognise the relationships between social and ecological challenges and incorporates environmental practice into skills-based learning.

Further, future research should seek to access the voices of clients, policymakers and organisational leaders to gain their perspectives. Importantly, recognising the significance of the natural environment is a shared issue for social workers and requires international collaboration. Despite the need to understand the differences between countries and to identify and address local challenges, contextualising ecosocial practice at the international level remains a necessity. Therefore, a more systematic research and comparison of the current state of ecosocial practice on a global level should be made.

## Conclusion

This article has examined human service professionals' perspectives about ecosocial practice in two countries: Finland and Australia. The findings provide important considerations about the state of ecosocial practice in human services in both countries. Whilst many human service professionals hold strong personal beliefs about the importance of the natural environment and addressing climate change, ecosocial practice remains on the margins of organisational and professional practice in both countries. It would seem that neoliberal economic ideology prevails in Finland and Australia, notwithstanding their different human service systems, and preventing a foundational ecosocial transition for the profession, away from its modernist roots. More extensive international research comparing ecosocial strategies and progress towards ecosocial practice and policy, together with collective action locally and globally, is needed.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Charles Sturt University for providing funding to support the Australian project, and Gail Fuller, Manager, Spatial Data Analysis Network (SPAN) at Charles Sturt University for assisting with the Australian survey design and implementation, and data analysis and advice. We also acknowledge University of Jyväskylä researchers Satu Ranta-Tyrkkö and Petteri Niemi, who were involved in conducting the Finnish survey, on the basis of which the comparison was possible.

## Funding

The Australian project was funded by Charles Sturt University. The Finnish study was funded by University of Jyväskylä.

*Conflict of interest statement.* None declared.

## References

- Allen, M. D. (2020) 'Climate change in Alaska: Social workers' attitudes, beliefs, and experiences', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **29**(4), pp. 310–20.
- Alston, M. and Bowles, W. (2018) *Research for Social Workers: An Introduction to Methods*, 4th edn, London, Routledge.
- Avoindata.fi (2023) 'Sosiaali- ja terveydenhuollon ammattihenkilöt [Social and health-care professionals]', available online at: [https://www.avoindata.fi/data/en\\_GB/dataset/sosiaali-ja-terveydenhuollon-ammattihenkilot/resource/94f56e8b-8942-4b1b-afd7-f8639f1cb7ef](https://www.avoindata.fi/data/en_GB/dataset/sosiaali-ja-terveydenhuollon-ammattihenkilot/resource/94f56e8b-8942-4b1b-afd7-f8639f1cb7ef) (accessed February 25, 2023).

- Bell, K. (2023) 'Post-anthropocentric social work: Transformative philosophy for contemporary theory and practice', in Hölscher, D., Hugman, R. and McAuliffe, D. (eds), *Social Work Theory and Ethics: Ideas in Practice*, Singapore, Springer.
- Boetto, H. (2017) 'A transformative eco-social model: Challenging modernist assumptions in social work', *British Journal of Social Work*, **47**(1), pp. 48–67.
- Boetto, H. (2019) 'Advancing transformative eco-social change: Shifting from modernist to holistic foundations', *Australian Social Work*, **72**(2), pp. 139–51.
- Boetto, H., Bowles, W., Närhi, K. and Powers, M. (2020) 'Raising awareness of transformative ecosocial work: Participatory action research with Australian practitioners', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **29**(4), pp. 300–09.
- Boetto, H., Närhi, K. and Bowles, W. (2022) 'Creating 'communities of practice' to enhance ecosocial work: A comparison between Finland and Australia', *British Journal of Social Work*, **52**(8), pp. 4815–35.
- Boetto, H., Bowles, W., Cordoba, S., Ramsay, S. and Shepard, M. (2024) 'Australian perspectives on environmental practice: A national survey with human services professionals', *Journal of Social Work*. DOI: [10.1177/14680173241258885](https://doi.org/10.1177/14680173241258885)
- Bozalek, V. and Pease, B. (eds.) (2021) *Post-Anthropocentric Social Work: Critical Posthuman and New Materialist Perspectives*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- Coates, J. (2003) *Ecology and Social Work: Towards a New Paradigm*, Halifax, Fernwood Publishing.
- Cordoba, P. S. and Bando, L. (2021) 'Social work and the Sustainable Development Goals: A student placement model', *Australian Social Work*, **75**(4), pp. 519–26.
- Dominelli, L. (2012) *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- Erhard, F., Jukschat, N. and Sammet, K. (2021) 'Lost in translation? Openness, reflexivity and pragmatism as guiding principles for cross-language qualitative research', *Qualitative Social Research*, **22**(3), pp. 1–20.
- Fremstad, A. and Paul, M. (2022) 'Neoliberalism and climate change: How the free-market myth has prevented climate action', *Ecological Economics*, **197**, 107353.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2022) 'Climate Change 2022: Impacts, adaptation, and vulnerability', Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, Cambridge and New York, Cambridge University Press, available online at: <https://www.ipcc.ch/report/sixth-assessment-report-working-group-ii> (accessed June 21, 2023).
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2021) 'Social Work and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)', available online at: <https://www.ifsw.org/social-work-and-the-united-nations-sustainable-development-goals-sdgs/> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2022) 'The role of social workers in advancing a new eco-social world', available online at: <https://www.ifsw.org/the-role-of-social-workers-in-advancing-a-new-eco-social-world> (accessed June 21, 2023).
- Islam, S. N. and Winkel, J. (2017) *Climate change and social inequality*, Department of Economic Affairs, Working paper no. 152, United Nations.
- Kokkonen, T., Närhi, K. and Matthies, A.-L. (2018) 'Transformation of the Finnish welfare state', in Masoud, K. and Jönsson, J. (eds), *Neoliberalism, Nordic Welfare States and Social Work*, London, Routledge.

- Kuir-Ayius, D. and Marena, D. (2019) 'Environmental justice and social work in climate change in the Pacific Islands', in Ravulo, J., Mafile'o, T. and Yeates, D. B. (eds), *Pacific Social Work: Navigating Practice, Policy and Research*, Abingdon, Routledge.
- Labour Market Insights. (2023) 'Social Workers', available online at: <https://labourmarketinsights.gov.au/occupation-profile/social-workers?occupationCode=2725> (accessed March 27, 2023).
- Marlow, C. and Van Rooyen, C. (2001) 'How green is the environment in social work?', *International Social Work*, **44**(2), pp. 241–54.
- Matthies, A.-L., Peeters, J., Hirvilammi, T. and Stamm, I. (2020) 'Ecosocial innovations enabling social work to promote new forms of sustainable economy', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **29**(4), pp. 378–89.
- McKinnon, J. and Alston, M. (eds.) (2016) *Ecological Social Work: Towards Sustainability*, London, Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ministry of Social Affairs and Health. (2023) 'Social services', available online at: <https://stm.fi/en/social-services> (accessed November 22, 2023).
- Moore, D. S., McCabe, G. P. and Craig, B. A. (2017) *Introduction to the Practice of Statistics*, 9th edn, New York, Macmillan Education.
- 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), *The Eco-Social Approach in Social Work*, Jyväskylä, Sophi.
- Nesmith, A. and Smyth, N. (2015) 'Environmental justice and social work education: Social workers' professional perspectives', *Social Work Education*, **34**(5), pp. 484–501.
- Nöjd, T., Kannasoja, S., Niemi, P., Ranta-Tyrkkö, S. and Närhi, K. 'Social welfare professionals' views in addressing environmental issues in social work in Finland', *Nordic Social Work Research Advance Access published September 3, 2023*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/2156857X.2023.2253456>.
- Nöjd, T., Kannasoja, S., Niemi, P., Ranta-Tyrkkö, S. and Närhi, K. (2024) 'Ecosocial work among social welfare professionals in Finland', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **33**(3), pp. 732–44.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2021a) 'Regional outlook 2021: Country notes—Australia', available online at: <https://www.oecd.org/regional/RO2021%20Australia.pdf> (accessed June 21, 2023).
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2021b) 'Regional outlook 2021: Country notes—Finland progress in the net zero transition', available online at: <https://www.oecd.org/regional/RO2021%20Finland.pdf> (accessed June 21, 2023).
- Powers, M., Rambaree, K. and Peeters, J. (2019) 'Degrowth for transformational alternatives as radical social work practice', *Critical and Radical Social Work*, **7**(3), pp. 417–33.
- Ramsay, S. and Boddy, J. (2017) 'Environmental social work: A concept analysis', *British Journal of Social Work*, **47** (1), pp. 68–86.
- Sachs, J. D., Lafortune, G., Fuller, G. and Drumm, E. (2023) *Implementing the SDG Stimulus, Sustainable Development Report 2023*, Dublin, Dublin University Press.
- Stehlik, D. (2013) 'Social Work Practice with Drought Affected Families', in Gray, M., Coates, J. and Hetherington, T. (eds), *Environmental Social Work*, London, Routledge.

- Thysell, M. and Cuadra, C. B. (2022) 'Imagining the ecosocial within social work', *International Journal of Social Welfare*, **32**(4), pp. 455–72.
- United Nations. (2015) 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals', available online at: <https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/publications/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf> (accessed May 30, 2024).
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2019) 'Climate change in Asia and the Pacific. What's at stake?', available online at: <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/news/climate-change-asia-and-pacific-whats-stake> (accessed June 1, 2023).
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNDRR). (2015) 'Sendai framework for disaster risk reduction 2015–2030', [https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291\\_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf](https://www.unisdr.org/files/43291_sendaiframeworkfordrren.pdf) (accessed June 21, 2023).
- Wallace, J. and Pease, B. (2011) 'Neoliberalism and Australian social work: Accommodation or resistance?', *Journal of Social Work*, **11**(2), pp. 132–42.
- World Bank. (2022) 'Population total', available online at: <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL> (accessed November 22, 2023).

© The Author(s) 2024. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of The British Association of Social Workers.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

British Journal of Social Work, 2024, 00, 1–21

<https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae135>

Original article