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ABSTRACT

Social work has a long tradition of being explicitly concerned with the 'person-in-environment', recognising the need to take account of context when working to address disadvantage and maximise wellbeing. This concern with environment, and indeed with the concept of sustainability has, however, been focused primarily on the social rather than the ecological (Coates 2003; Besthorne & McMillen 2002). At a time when increasing attention is being paid to the importance of promoting education about, and for, sustainability in higher education (Sipos, Battisti & Grimm 2008; Wright 2002; Thomas 2004), the social work profession also needs to begin engaging in a more holistic and integrative manner with issues of sustainability and our relationship to the non-human world. This paper reports on a course offering in a social work degree program that encourages students to consider the arguments for an expanded ecological awareness and its place in social work theory and practice. Through a critical examination of the modernist foundations of the profession and an emphasis on the development of ecological literacy, the course focuses on the ways in which such an approach might manifest in practice at the community level.

Keywords: Social work; Sustainability; Education; Ecological Consciousness

INTRODUCTION

The ecological crisis confronting humanity has been increasingly well documented in recent times, with particular attention being paid to the nature and impact of anthropogenic climate change and its consequences at global, national and local levels (United Nations Environment Program 2007; Beeton, Buckley, Jones, Morgan, Reichelt & Trewin 2006). There is also clear evidence that climate change has operated as a coalescing point for public awareness around environmental issues, with greatly increased media attention and public agitation for, and acceptance of, measures to address the crisis (see, for example, O'Brien 2008). Globally, governments have gradually begun to turn their attention to developing policies which seek to address the causes and consequences of climate change and a wide range of non-government organisations continue to agitate and advocate for action in this area. It can be argued, however, that the barriers to effective, united and global action to address the ecological crisis remain stubbornly in place, with the ongoing debate around the relative contributions of developed and developing nations to a global emissions reduction plan an unfortunate example of this.

Against this background, it is clear that the concept of sustainability has gained considerable traction in both a popular and policy sense. Yet much remains to be done. The higher education sector has some clear responsibilities in this regard, both as a source of emerging knowledge and information about sustainability, as produced through research and development activities, but also in a broader educative sense in terms of the ways in which the broad goals of education are seen to integrate or ignore the demands of ecological sustainability. Addressing this issue requires paying attention to what the sector as a whole is doing, but must also involve looking in a quite specific and focused manner at the ways in which issues of ecological sustainability are, or are not, being addressed in

individual discipline areas within the sector. As a professional degree currently taught through many universities in Australia, and in many countries around the globe, the discipline of social work is an example of an area where the concerns of ecological sustainability are yet to make a significant impact on educational practice, but where the potential for the useful and effective integration of issues of sustainability into traditional curricula is high.

SOCIAL WORK'S ECOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

A concern with people's environment has been described as one of the distinguishing features of the social work profession, one which differentiates it from other approaches to human service work and which was evident in the very earliest efforts at organised welfare (Besthorn 2002; Coates 2003). While social work was distracted from this contextual emphasis in the mid 20th century by the emerging dominance of psychoanalytic models and the resulting focus on individualised approaches, a clear tradition of practice which took the environment into account continued through this time. This was strengthened by the development of general systems theory, a model for explaining the nature of organisation in the natural world. The influence of general systems theory quickly expanded beyond the field of the natural sciences and into a range of other areas, including social work (see, for example, Hearn 1969; Pincus & Minahan 1973). The fundamental emphases of systems approaches have been further modified and adapted for application in the social sciences, and in social work have been most clearly manifest in the emergence of 'ecological' and 'life' models within the profession, theoretical approaches which have re-emphasised the 'person-in-environment' perspective (Germain 1979; Germain & Gitterman 1980). It could be argued, therefore, that social work already has a clear, theoretical link to the central concepts of ecology and that a recognition of the connections between the natural world and individuals' wellbeing is built into the profession's theoretical foundations.

However, in seeking to adapt and modify the fundamentals of systems thought to better suit the social concerns of the profession, an unfortunate narrowing of perspective has occurred. The result of this is that the profession lays claim to an ecological perspective, and a concern with the relationship between people and their environment, but this conception of ecology and environment relates almost exclusively to 'social' ecology and the 'social' environment. In other words, as ecological theories have been developed within social work, the non-human world has, to a large extent, been excluded and ignored.

There would undoubtedly be many in the profession who would consider this exclusion as justifiable and even commonsensical. After all, social work as a profession invariably deals with the human consequences of a wide range of serious, seemingly intractable, issues such as poverty, abuse, disadvantage and oppression in all its forms. These are clearly social in nature and practitioners are usually engaged in direct practice with people, either as individuals and families or as members of groups and communities. Yet as the reality of the environmental consequences of human activity become clearer, so to do the undeniable links between the health of the environment and the issue of human wellbeing and, indeed, survival. In this sense what is clearly, if slowly, emerging is recognition of the inextricable relationship between the concerns of ecological justice and those of social justice - the traditional focus of social work. The articulation of these links is now happening in both issues based and broader, global analyses (see, for example Guest, Douglas, Woodruff, & McMichael 1999).

THE NARROWING FOCUS OF HIGHER EDUCATION

The narrative of modern higher education represents, in many respects, a distillation of the themes of modernity, with its emphasis on reductionism, dualistic thinking and the notion of progressivism. Generally speaking, the university sector has been characterised by increasing levels of specialisation and a narrowing of focus, particularly as the goals of higher education have been conflated with the needs of industry and capital. David Orr (1992; 1999) has been a leading voice in recognising the consequences of this narrowing and specialisation for the broader goal of sustainability. Orr (2003) argues that

> *What passes for education has become highly technical and specialised, little of which is aimed at drawing out the full human stature of young people. We've become a nation of specialists and technicians, not broadly educated and discerning people.*

The consequence of such processes has been an educational disconnection between what we teach and learn in universities and what will actually be required if we are to address the ecological crisis and move towards a sustainable way of life.

In his work on developing an integrated approach to the science of sustainability, Capra (2002) reflects on the increasing specialisation and intellectual siloing of disciplines in higher education, noting that social scientists are concerned with rules of behaviour and social structures while the natural sciences have confined themselves to a consideration of the world of matter. Capra argues that this is a system, and a distinction, that cannot be sustained:

> *In the future, this strict division will no longer be possible, because the key challenge of this new century – for social scientists, natural scientists and everyone else – will be to build ecologically sustainable communities, designed in such a way that their technologies and social institutions – their material and social structures – do not interfere with nature's inherent ability to sustain life.* (2002, p. xix)

A similar analysis emerges from the work of O'Sullivan (1999; 2000; 2008), who has engaged in a far-reaching and visionary articulation of a new form of education, one which he refers to as a "transformative-ecozoic education" (1999, p. 6). O'Sullivan's vision is based on a critique of modernity which argues that while many benefits have flowed from the enlightenment project, modernism has reached the limit of its usefulness and new approaches are called for. O'Sullivan argues that contemporary educational approaches lack a comprehensive cosmology and in particular, a more clearly ecological vision. He states, for example, that while critical pedagogy has attempted to address issues of oppression and social justice, it lacks an orientation to the wider biotic community.

> *The general direction of critical perspectives is towards anthropocentrism. The criticism of anthropocentrism is by no means a reason for dismissal of the vital concerns that critical perspectives pose for contemporary education. These issues must be taken forwards and fused into wider biocentric concerns* (O'Sullivan 1999, p. 64).

As a profession with its educational processes now firmly embedded in the formal university sector, social work reflects these trends and manifests these issues of specialisation, reduction and disconnection. Fortunately, for social work as a discipline and for higher education as a whole, the growing interest in the issue of sustainability in education has begun to produce both thinking and practical initiatives that may be pointing the way forward.

SUSTAINABILITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Over a number of decades now there has been a steadily increasing interest in the idea of sustainability education at the university level and, indeed, in the idea of sustainable universities. Going back as far as 1972, a number of international and national statements and declarations linking sustainability and higher education have been produced, including the important Tbilisi and Talloires Declarations (Wright 2002; Bekessey, Burgman, Wright, Filho & Smith, nd). Reflections on the links between sustainability and higher education often result in an analysis of the fundamental roles of the university in society and, indeed, of the role of education in its broadest sense (Cullingford 2004; O'Sullivan 2008).

Wright (2002) identifies a number of themes that emerge from both the declarations mentioned above and the policies that have been subsequently implemented by a range of institutions. These themes

include (but are not limited to) the sustainable physical operations of universities, academic research, environmental literacy, ethical and moral responsibility, interdisciplinary curriculum and public outreach. In a practical sense, these themes represent attempts by the sector and institutions to take direct steps towards integrating issues of sustainability into both organisational and educative practice. Wolfe (2001) and Moody & Hartel (2007), for example, report on the experience of universities in the USA where environmental literacy requirements have been introduced into undergraduate courses. As these themes continue to emerge in practice, there is clear evidence that the sector as a whole, as well as many individual institutions, is moving towards a meaningful engagement with the issues of sustainability, although, as Blewitt notes, this movement often "seems to be occurring in geological rather than human time" (2004, p. 1).

In Australia, the report card on sustainability in higher education appears to show mixed results. While some institutions are clearly linking sustainability into wider organisational and curricular activities (Lang, Thomas & Wilson 2006), some analysts claim that there is little implementation of the commitments made through, for example, the signing of declarations and support of sustainability concepts (Thomas 2004). As Sherren notes "Sustainability is currently not well integrated across universities, but where the idea is being adopted, it seems to be happening in a meaningful fashion" (2006, p. 410). Clear evidence of this mixed response emerges from Holdsworth, Wyborn, Bekessey and Thomas's (2008) research on the extent to which universities are providing professional development opportunities around sustainability of academic staff, where results indicate that the commitment of universities to sustainability has not yet translated into this area in a meaningful way.

The consequence of this overall interest in and commitment to sustainability in higher education not yet being fully matched by effective action is that the critiques levelled at the traditional university structure and approach to education remain significant and important. Despite some promising and optimistic signs, issues such as disciplinary specialisation remain obstacles to the incorporation of more holistic and integrative approaches. At this stage we still seem a long way from the educational vision being articulated by Orr (2003) and O'Sullivan (1999; 2002; 2008) among others, which advocates for an approach that is profoundly holistic and integral. O'Sullivan, for example, argues that the features of such an educational approach will include an orientation to knowledge that is synthetic and holistic, that is time-developmental in nature, and that includes 'earth education', by which he means "not education about the earth, but the earth as the immediate self-educating community of those living and non-living beings that constitute the earth" (1999, p. 76).

ECOLOGICAL APPROACHES IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Despite the encouraging signs emerging from initiatives that seek to re-orient our higher education system towards education both about and for sustainability, a similar movement is difficult if not impossible to discern within the domain of social work education. As noted earlier in this paper, the academic literature within the field highlights the existence of a small but significant stream of work that seeks to link issues of ecology and sustainability with the traditional social justice concerns of the profession, but this literature remains marginal to the mainstream concerns of the profession. Indeed, a scan of the course offerings of social work programs across Australia reveals very little content concerned explicitly and directly with issues of ecology and environment, except where those concepts are used in their narrow, exclusively social, sense.

An exception to this general situation is a course which has been taught at James Cook University for the past 10 years, which, in its various iterations, has attempted to introduce social work and community welfare students to an approach that joins issues of social and ecological justice through the framework of community-based practice.

'WS3214: Development approaches to eco-social justice' is a compulsory level three subject taken by students completing the Bachelor of Social Work and Bachelor of Community Welfare degree programs at James Cook. The subject is also available as an elective choice for students studying in a

range of other degrees and is regularly taken by students from the social sciences, arts, education and psychology programs. The intended learning outcomes for the subject convey some sense of its orientation, with the objectives including students being able to:

- Locate their personal worldview within the dominant modernist paradigm and assess the implications of this worldview for their professional practice.
- Identify key global environmental issues and articulate the connections between these issues and the traditional concerns of social welfare
- Compare current social welfare theories advocating a 'person-in-environment' perspective, with an expanded ecological perspective that incorporates a consideration of the non-human world
- Describe the foundational principles of an eco-social justice approach to social welfare
- Identify the key features of community and social development approaches to social welfare practice

The content of the subject deals with a range of theoretical and practical material, from the values and beliefs of modernity, through the nature and extent of the ecological crisis and on to the nexus of ecological and social justice perspectives. Students are encouraged to explore the ways in which an expanded ecological perspective might be enacted in social welfare practice, with a particular focus on community development as a valuable and congruent practice approach. Key to the educational strategies developed in the subject is an emphasis on a critically reflective approach to linking the personal with the ecological, and the development of skills and knowledge for advocating within the profession for consideration of issues around ecology and sustainability.

To this end, the major assessment pieces in the subject are an ecological autobiography, in which students reflect on their personal experience through the lens of ecology, and a paper prepared for submission to an academic journal in which the students must mount an argument for the incorporation of an expanded ecological perspective into social work theory and practice. Taken together, these assessment pieces, along with the course content and pedagogical approach, aim to encourage students to expand their understanding of issues of ecology and sustainability beyond the narrow social constraints currently imposed by the profession. The subject therefore attempts to address both affective and cognitive learning, as important dimensions in education for sustainability. In this way it reflects the concerns of Shepard (2008) who argues that

> *Affective learning relates to values, attitudes and behaviours and involves the learner emotionally. Cognitive learning relates more to knowledge and its application. It is possible to construct an argument that the essence of education for sustainability is a quest for affective outcomes. (p. 88)*

The affective component of this process is seen as particularly important within a social work education setting, given that the profession has a foundation that rests on a particular set of values, and that the consideration and articulation of values and ethics is a core component of all social work courses. McMillan, Wright and Beazley's (2004) work is an example of research demonstrating that exposure to environmental content in undergraduate studies can have an affective impact, leading students to develop deeper environmental values and become more ecocentric in their worldviews. This value shift allows new opportunities for practice to be identified and explored. Two recent examples communicated to the author involve graduates who have developed ecologically oriented practice in their work with youth and new migrants respectively. These initiatives address traditional social justice concerns, but do so in a manner which recognises the interdependence of social and environmental wellbeing, using environmental activities as a method for creating social capital amongst disadvantaged groups.

In this way, the course crosses the boundaries of the traditionally defined discipline and allows students to make connections with other fields of study and, importantly, to explore the role that their own professional discipline might play in responding to, and addressing, the causes of the ecological crisis.

CONCLUSION

Set against the slow, but optimistic progress occurring within the higher education sector, both organisationally and educationally, the debates around education about, and for, sustainability do not appear to have made much of an impact within the discipline of social work to date. Despite a theoretical background that expresses concern for principles of ecology and that recognises the significance of environment for human wellbeing, the restricted definition of these concepts within the discipline means that social work education has paid little attention to issues of sustainability except in their purely social aspects. If higher education is to fulfil the important role in education for sustainability that is now being recognised throughout the sector, individual disciplines must also strive to recognise the ways in which issues of sustainability relate to their fields and to develop educational approaches that reflect this understanding. Inevitably this will mean reversing some of the trends towards greater specialisation and narrowing of focus that have become evident over time. For social work education, this will involve working towards creating opportunities for students to develop an expanded ecological consciousness, one that sees their profession as an important part of a broader movement towards sustainability.

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