



Rethinking Social Work's Interpretation of 'Environmental Justice': From Local to Global

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Abstract

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7 This article challenges social workers to expand their understanding of the “person-in-
8 environment” perspective and become more active in addressing current environmental crises.
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10 Although social work scholars have begun to explore the relationship between social work and
11 the natural and built environment and professional organizations mandate the integration of this
12 content into practice and education, these goals remain unrealized, particularly in the U.S. To
13 address these issues more effectively, social work educators will need to distinguish between
14 understanding persons in their environment and environmentalism, and between
15 environmentalism and environmental justice. This article analyzes the emergence of the
16 environmental justice movement in the U.S. and other nations and its relationship to
17 environmental racism. It presents a case study of a local environmental justice effort to
18 demonstrate how social workers can use their knowledge and skills to make important
19 contributions to environmental justice and sustainability. It also discusses the potential of “green
20 social work” and transformative learning theory as tools to help social work educators better
21 equip students make strategic alliances across professions, disciplines, and systems to address
22 contemporary environmental crises.
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Rethinking Social Work's Interpretation of 'Environmental Justice': From Local to Global

Introduction

Scholars have recently begun to explore the relationship between social work and the natural and built environment (Coates & Gray, 2013; Pulla, 2013); and professional organizations (NASW, 2009; IFSW, 2013) mandate the integration of this content into practice and education. Yet, to a considerable extent, these goals remain unrealized, particularly in the U.S., although social justice principles and the person-in-environment perspective have formed the foundation of the profession for over a century. Because of the primacy of selfhood over collective rights, contemporary social work practice in the U.S. focuses more on adaptation than on challenging the structures underlying environmental inequities (Reisch & Jani, 2012). Consequently, the relationship between persons and the environment is viewed in a static, individually-oriented manner that fails to recognize the differences that exist, among and within nations, based on cultural norms and political-economic realities (Jani & Reisch, 2011).

These differences appear in accounts of creation itself. Many indigenous narratives emphasize harmony between humans and the Earth. By contrast, Western religious and secular ideas about this relationship reflect an anthropocentric view of the universe that rationalizes environmental exploitation and destruction in the name of progress.ⁱ

The earliest Western concerns about the environment emerged from both idealistic and scientific perspectives. In response to the social impact of the Industrial Revolution, the 19th Century Romantic Movement celebrated a pre-industrial view of nature, while the public health movement responded to increased evidence that environmental degradation had deleterious health and social effects, particularly on the urban working class.ⁱⁱ Yet, the U.S. government did not overcome corporate opposition and develop major environmental initiatives until the 1960s

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3 and 1970s, inspired in part by Rachel Carson's book, *Silent Spring* (1962). It soon became clear,
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5 however, that these reforms did not address the environmental injustices that disproportionately
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7 affected racial and ethnic communities, indigenous peoples, and low-income persons all over the
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9 world (Bullard, 1994).
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12 This article challenges social workers to expand their understanding of the "person-in-
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14 environment" perspective and become more active in addressing current environmental crises.
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16 To address these issues effectively, social work educators will need to articulate the links
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18 between the "person-in-environment" perspective and environmentalism and distinguish between
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20 environmentalism and environmental justice. We assert that social work's "ambivalent
21
22 understanding of its relationship to the natural world" is not only unacceptable, but arguably
23
24 unethical (Besthorn & Saleeby, 2003) and suggest how educators can better equip students to
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26 make strategic alliances across professions, disciplines, and systems to address these crises.
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28 After summarizing the evolution of social work perspectives on the environment in the U.S., we
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30 discuss the emergence of the environmental justice movement and its relationship to
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32 environmental racism, describe how globalization influences international perspectives on the
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34 environment, and through a case study, outline how social workers can use their knowledge and
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36 skills to make important contributions to environmental justice and sustainability.
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43 **Social Work and the Environment**

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45 The responses of the social work profession to environmental issues paralleled those of U.S.
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47 society as a whole. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, social workers, particularly in the
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49 settlement house movement, were at the forefront of the public health response to urban
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51 problems created by industrialization. They recognized the relationship between the physical
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53 environment and human well-being, that "*where* people live profoundly influences *how* they live,
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3 with important implications for ... social justice” (Kemp, 2011, p. 1200). By addressing these
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5 public health and psycho-social effects, radical social workers articulated an early version of
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7 environmental justice that resonates to some extent today in the work of the Social Work Action
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9 Network (SWAN) in the U.K. and the Social Welfare Action Alliance (SWAA) in the U.S.
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12 (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).

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15 During the 20th century, this emphasis declined in U.S. social work for several reasons.
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17 In pursuit of professional status, social workers increasingly focused on individual or family
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19 problems rather than structural issues (Specht & Courtenay, 1994). Many social workers
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21 embraced the popular view that economic growth, rather than redistribution, would ultimately
22
23 reduce the environmental injustices poverty created. They viewed the solution to environmental
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25 injustice in terms of adaptation to environmental conditions or amelioration of the problems they
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27 produced, rather than eradicating their underlying causes (Reisch & Andrews, 2002).
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32 Although Richmond (1917) exhorted social workers to “treat individuals by way of their
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34 social environment,” and social work theory consistently emphasizes an ecological, person-in-
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36 environment approach (Karls & Wandrei, 1994), practitioners tend to regard the environment as
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38 the *context* for practice instead of a dynamic component of people’s lives (Jani & Reisch, 2011).
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40 The recent focus on “evidence-based practice” has transformed social work research from
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42 analysis of structural causes to measurement of the effectiveness of scientifically-determined
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44 “interventions,” tacitly accepting the status quo (Reisch & Jani, 2012).
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48 **The Environmental Justice Movement and Environmental Racism**

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50 The idea that environmental forces determine the quality of human well-being aligns with key
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52 principles of the contemporary environmental justice movement, which emerged during the early
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54 1980s, fueled by growing concerns that toxic facilities were disproportionately located in low-
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3 income communities of color. Described as a "marriage of the movement for social justice with
4 environmentalism" (McGurty, 1997, p. 303), it applied a civil rights approach and inspired a
5 broad range of local struggles to redress existing environmental inequities through targeted
6 action. Unlike frameworks that stress the preservation of ecosystem biodiversity and natural
7 resources, an environmental justice framework centers the experiences of populations who are
8 most affected by environmental degradation and enhances their ability to participate
9 meaningfully in local environmental decision-making (Bullard, 1994). Developing robust public
10 participation mechanisms, for example, allows communities to proactively challenge adverse
11 environmental decisions made on their behalf. Many barriers to such participation still exist,
12 including limited access to health and environmental data and insufficient funding for technical
13 assistance that would facilitate a community's understanding of the often complex scientific and
14 regulatory policies that drive environmental decision-making. Reducing these barriers is critical
15 if low-income communities are to have a voice in shaping the environmental decisions that
16 directly affect their short and long-term health and well-being.

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37 A statement by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA, 2014) acknowledges
38 this imperative. It defines environmental justice as

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41 the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race,
42 color, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation,
43 and enforcement of environmental law, regulations, and policies .

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48 At the local level, environmental justice can be achieved through the development of viable
49 alternatives to undesirable land use (Maller, et al, 2006). For example, there has been increased
50 attention recently to the impact of hydraulic "fracking" by extractive industries on racial and
51 ethnic minority, low-income, and rural communities in the U.S. and developing nations (Kovats,
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3 et al, 2014; Davis, 2012).

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5 The environmental justice movement also inspired the term “environmental racism,”
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7 which Bullard (1993-94) defined as "any policy, practice or directive that differentially affects or
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9 disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on
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11 race or color" (p. 1037). This term gained currency after the United Church of Christ (1987)
12
13 issued a groundbreaking report demonstrating how race predicted the location of toxic waste
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15 facilities. There is abundant evidence of this phenomenon. The impact of uranium mining in the
16
17 North American West on Indigenous people; the frequent exposure of Latino farm workers and
18
19 Indian cotton farmers to toxic pesticides; and the effects of illegally dumped manufacturing
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21 waste on the drinking water of residents along the U.S.-Mexico border are just a few examples.
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26 27 **Lack of Diversity within Mainstream Environmental Movements**

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29 Environmental racism is also reflected in the composition of the environmental movement.
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31 During the first half of the 20th century, environmentalists focused primarily on wilderness and
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33 wildlife protection (Worster, 2008). These goals mirrored the interests of the movement’s initial
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35 supporters –privileged white populations who wanted to retain their ability to enjoy outdoor
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37 recreational opportunities, particularly in the nation’s new national parks. Early environmental
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39 organizations excluded racial minorities and working class people and largely ignored the
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41 environmental problems of inner cities, because they regarded urban areas as places of physical
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43 degradation and moral decay.
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49 Today, many mainstream environmental organizations still reflect these initial
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51 characteristics. Consequently, many low-income and minority communities feel alienated by the
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53 environmental movement and consider it elitist. They view the reforms it promotes as
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55 disproportionately benefiting the movement’s supporters while imposing costs on them (Bullard,
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3 2005).

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6 In response to this neglect, the environmental justice movement gained momentum and
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8 relevance. In 1991, more than 650 grassroots and national leaders representing over 300
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10 environmental groups attended the First National People of Color Environmental Leadership
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12 Summit. In 1994, President Clinton issued Executive Order 12898, the first major federal
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14 initiative requiring all government agencies to collect data on the health and environmental
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16 impact of their programs on minority and low-income populations (Executive Order, 1994). By
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18 the end of Clinton's second term, however, resistance from Congress, industry groups, and even
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20 within the EPA, significantly blunted this push for environmental justice. Today, however,
21
22 environmental advocates are making important progress in preventing undesirable and
23
24 unaccountable local land use and other environmental injustices in low-income communities
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26 through targeted policy reforms, public education campaigns, and sustained community
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28 organizing. The case study below illustrates how social workers can be important catalysts in
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30 advancing these efforts.
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36 **CASE STUDY**

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38 In September 2009, Energy Answers International (EAI) applied to construct the largest waste-
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40 to-energy (WTE) incinerator in the U.S. in the Curtis Bay neighborhood of Baltimore. The
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42 incinerator would be less than a mile from a high school; over 230 trucks each day would
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44 transport 4,000 tons of waste through Curtis Bay and surrounding communities (Smith, 2014).
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46 Curtis Bay is already overburdened by toxic facilities, including one of the largest medical waste
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48 incinerators in the country, chemical plants, fuel depots, and a 200-acre coal pier (Williams,
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50 2015). It has some of the poorest health statistics in Maryland and the dubious distinction of
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52 ranking first in the U.S. for its concentration and quantity of toxic air pollutants (Massachusetts
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3 Institute of Technology, 2013). Given this overall profile, a cumulative risk assessment would
4 likely demonstrate the compounding effects of additional noxious facilities (Sexton & Linder,
5 2010). Although the WTE industry insists that incineration is environmentally and economically
6 efficient, environmental advocates and the United Nations have pointed out the numerous
7 adverse effects of incinerators on human health, climate change, and efforts to reduce waste and
8 promote recycling.
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Inspired by the incinerator project, a group of local high school students initiated a campaign to block construction which used creative strategies to highlight the community's opposition to the project and undermine the incinerator's financing plan. Greg Sawtell, a social worker and organizer with United Workers, a Baltimore-based human rights group that advocates for low-wage workers, has worked with these students for several years through a human rights study project called Free Your Voice (FYV) to build a small, but growing movement to stop construction and raise the environmental literacy, social justice consciousness, and leadership skills of these youth. The students' campaign stresses the connection between human rights and the impact of recent developments on their communities. It addresses such questions as "What broader structural changes are needed to facilitate our human rights?"

FYV investigated how local and state authorities allowed EAI to construct the incinerator in an environmentally overburdened community. Students learned that only a handful of community members knew about the project, although many residents had serious concerns about the health risks associated with living in such close proximity to a large incinerator. To increase community awareness, Sawtell worked with FYV to attract media attention through such tactics as a march from the school to the proposed incinerator site, a presentation to the Baltimore City School Board using rap performances and poetry reading, and testimony before

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3 the state legislature supporting a bill mandating a cumulative health risk assessment when siting
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5 environmentally hazardous facilities (Smith, 2015).
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8 Another effective tactic targeted EAI's energy-buying contract with local government
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10 entities. The students informed the School Board that it could opt out of its contract to purchase
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12 power from EAI if the plant did not deliver electricity within 48 months of the agreement (April
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14 2015). For a number of reasons, including increased local opposition, the project's start date has
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16 been delayed until at least 2016. As a follow-up, FYV addressed Baltimore City's Commission
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18 on Sustainability. The group is now exploring zero-waste strategies that would create local
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20 recycling and composting jobs, strengthen the community's economic base, and obviate the need
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22 for an incinerator. Sawtell's success in building community resistance to environmental injustice
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24 illustrates how social workers can amplify the voices of marginalized constituencies in creating a
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26 more environmentally just world.
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31 **Globalization and Environmental Justice**

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34 Despite important environmental justice victories highlighted by the case study above, during the
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36 past several decades, economic globalization has been a major obstacle to the development of a
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38 robust global environmental justice agenda. Hancock (2003) claims that global capitalism
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40 subjugates human rights and environmental protection to economic growth and the maintenance
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42 of inefficient patterns of production and undermines the ability of communities to extract
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44 environmental concessions from corporations that seek to locate or expand in their area.
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48 Communities are thus compelled to sacrifice environmental quality, occupational safety, and
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50 political control in the pursuit of illusory economic gains. Current policy making mechanisms
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52 remain locked in anachronistic patterns, while U.S. courts and international institutions, such as
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54 the World Trade Organization (WTO), have invalidated environmental, health, and worker safety
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3 laws and shielded corporations from any environmental liability. The combination of
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5 institutional failures and framing the issue as “environmental quality vs. growth” has permitted
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7 corporations to exploit natural resources in the most profitable and least sustainable ways and
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9 transfer social costs onto vulnerable populations in such diverse places as Central Europe, China,
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11 Brazil, sub-Saharan Africa, and the U.S. (Ife, 2008).
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15 In response to these developments environmental justice activists have emphasized four
16
17 major themes: equitable distribution of environmental risks and benefits (Korgen, White, &
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19 White, 2011); fair and meaningful participation in environmental decision-making; recognition
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21 and appreciation of diverse ways of life, local knowledge, and cultural differences; and the
22
23 capability of communities and individuals to function and flourish in their societies (Schlosberg,
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25 2007). For example, the environmental justice movement in the U.K. stresses the relationship
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27 between poverty and the environment, and health inequalities and social exclusion. The South
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29 African Constitution (1996) grants citizens the right to an “environment that is not harmful to
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31 their health or well-being” and “to ...secure ecologically sustainable development and use of
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33 natural resources.” Environmental justice activists in India link its attainment to human rights
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35 and access to adequate environmental resources for a healthy life; emphasize its importance for
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37 the poorest and least powerful people; regard environmental justice as an intergenerational issue;
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39 and recognize that the issue cannot be left to environmental activists alone (DYUTI, 2011).
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46 Despite these statements of principle, the creation of an effective cross-national strategy
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48 to counteract globalization’s far-reaching negative effects on low-income communities will
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50 require the development of sustainable international coalitions among groups that have a long
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52 history of antagonistic relationships or that are largely ignorant of each other’s existence:
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54 international trade unions, environmental groups, civil, women’s and human rights organizations,
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3 transnational NGOs, academic researchers, and some liberal economists. While many U.S.-based
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5 environmental justice networks and coalitions now include international partners, with a few
6
7 notable exceptions, U.S. social workers have not been active in anti-globalization or
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9 environmental justice efforts (Shaw, 2013).
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13 Nevertheless, during the past several decades, social workers have shifted from a
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15 primarily local orientation towards a more global perspective that highlights the importance of
16
17 human rights and environmental sustainability (Healy, 2001). Although some scholars and
18
19 activists have criticized the human rights framework as individually focused and Western-centric
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21 (Ife, 2007), it underscores the universal entitlement to the basic environmental necessities of life.
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23 Yet, while there is extensive literature examining the connections between human rights and
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25 social work (Ife, 2008; Reichert, 2011) and between international social work and
26
27 environmentalism (Zapf, 2009), there is scant mention of environmental justice within
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29 mainstream social work literature (Hawkins, 2010) or, except among radical social workers, of
30
31 the disproportionate cost that the world's poor pay for ecological damage (Sachs, 2009). Despite
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33 their widespread provision of direct services to victims of environmental crises, most social
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35 workers are largely absent from the policy- making structures that shape the quality and breadth
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37 of these services and more broadly, help determine how future environmental crises can be
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39 prevented.
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46 Dominelli's concept of "green social work" presents a way for social workers to fill this
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48 gap. It focuses on how responses to environmental crises must occur not only through service
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50 delivery, but must also by proactively addressing socio-economic disparities, consumption
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52 patterns, limited resources, and the manifest connections between poverty and the absence of
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54 environmental rights (Dominelli, 2012). As a conceptual framework, green social work helps
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3 clarify the global dimensions of various ecological crises and their impacts on social work's
4 professional ambit. The integration of green social work within anti-oppressive and radical
5 social work traditions can highlight core environmental justice principles, such as dismantling
6 the structural inequalities that expose low-income communities to disproportionate
7 environmental harm. As a practical framework, the concept is useful in enabling social workers
8 to translate their "on the ground experiences" into concrete efforts that address these structural
9 inequalities.

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20 Dominelli asserts that in order to confront current environmental crises effectively, social
21 workers must apply a sophisticated array of knowledge and skills. As the case study
22 demonstrates, social workers are well-equipped to deploy both clinical and macro-level skills
23 and experience to develop dynamic, culturally relevant responses to these issues. We possess
24 intimate knowledge of the effects of environmental degradation on vulnerable populations and
25 can enhance the representation of these populations in each phase of critical decision-making.
26 We also have an ethical responsibility to use our expertise to go beyond ameliorating the
27 consequences of environmental injustices by preventing further environmental degradation and
28 promoting environmentally sustainable ways of living.

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41 Potential roles include:

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43 • Working with environmentally overburdened communities, urban planners, and public
44 health professionals to create "bottom-up" ways of eliciting local knowledge through
45 spatial mapping technologies that can be translated to effective interventions (e.g.,
46 mapping of food deserts or accessible green space in low-income communities) (Kemp,
47 2011).
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49 • Using multi-level interventions to articulate essential links between individual well-
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3 being, the physical environment, and collective action.
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6 • Facilitating and mediating solution-oriented discussions between stakeholders to develop
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8 viable alternatives to environmental projects that prioritize environmental sustainability
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10 over profits.
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13 • Developing creative ways to incorporate community-based participatory research in
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15 development and planning processes, including environmental impact studies and
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17 community health profiles.
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20 • Translating individual and community stories of disproportionate exposure to
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22 environmental harms into policies that require cumulative risk assessments and enhanced
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24 public participation mechanisms early in the environmental decision-making process.
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27 • Mobilizing communities to engage in collective problem-solving by identifying
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29 community assets and power relationships between community members and groups
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31 (Dominelli, 2012).
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34 **Implications for Social Work Education**

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36 These potential practice roles have significant implications for the future of social work
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38 education. To better prepare students to address current environmental challenges, social work
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40 educators—particularly in the U.S.—will need to examine long-standing assumptions about
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42 practice, such as valuing individual autonomy over community rights and collective
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44 responsibility and expand the meaning of “person-in-environment” to include the natural and
45
46 built environment. Recent research indicates that students are receptive to such changes.
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50 Although they are introduced to the person-in-environment framework early in their studies,
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52 students receive little content on the role of the physical environment and even less on the
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54 relationships among human activity, structural inequality, and the natural world. While some
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3 educators suggest that additional content on the relationship between social work and
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5 environmental degradation may provide a clearer path for students to engage in environmental
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7 advocacy (Miller & Hayward, 2014), Jones (2010) asserts that simply adding courses to the
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9 curriculum will not produce the fundamental shifts needed to address ecological crises
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11 effectively. He and Mezirow (2003) suggest that transformative learning theory might be an
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13 effective way to change how students perceive the world by altering fixed assumptions into ideas
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15 that are more flexible and reflective.
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20 At its core, transformative learning theory seeks to shift the ways students see and make
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22 meaning of the world by revising problematic frames of reference—habits of mind, fixed
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24 assumptions, expectations—to make them more critical, reflective, and ultimately, open to
25
26 alternative ways of thinking. Encouraging students to reevaluate their relationship to the
27
28 nonhuman world will first require educators to interrogate and problematize the existing level of
29
30 ecological alienation prevalent among U.S. social work students. Critical reflection, already a
31
32 core component of social work education, can be used to challenge students' blind spots in their
33
34 own knowledge about the nonhuman world, cultural values, and larger economic processes like
35
36 globalization. Students, for example, could be assigned to write an autobiographical essay
37
38 discussing how modernity affects their relationship with the natural world or be introduced to a
39
40 “disorienting dilemma” that exposes their alienation from the environment. Using class time to
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42 visit community gardens, local trash incinerators, or degraded waterways is another instructive
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44 way to expose students to the impacts of human behavior on the natural world (Jones, 2010).
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48 These educational tools allow social work educators to model eco-oriented social work practice
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50 and encourage students to critically examine how larger economic and political forces shape the
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52 values and beliefs that contribute to current ecological crises.
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3 In addition, U.S. social work educators could revise how they integrate a global
4 perspective into their teaching. Although schools have attempted to “internationalize” their
5 curricula since the 1980s (Link & Ramanathan, 2011), U.S. social workers continue to be
6 relatively ignorant about international human rights norms and their legal enforcement (Ogden,
7 2008). To be relevant in an increasingly interconnected world, today’s students must not only
8 have a more global orientation, they must also recognize the consequences of the Global North’s
9 disproportionate consumption and exploitation of natural resources on developing nations
10 (Dominelli, 2012). This includes understanding how untrammled development and material
11 consumption often contradict the profession’s core values (Klein, 2014).
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24 Finally, social work educators could enhance students’ understanding of environmental
25 justice by exploring the connections between environmental racism and increasing inequality,
26 environmental degradation, and a general devaluing of the inherent dignity of persons.
27 Expanding the knowledge base of social work practice to include more content on human rights,
28 environmental justice, and sustainable development is a critical first step. It will provide “social
29 work... [with]... the opportunity to be part of the solution rather than an uninvolved bystander
30 to... emerging environmental predicaments” (McKinnon, 2008, p. 266). A second step would
31 involve discussions of practical interventions, at the individual and community level, to alleviate
32 the consequences of poverty without damaging the environment (Dominelli, 2012).
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45 **Conclusion**

46 In order for social workers to integrate environmental concerns into their understanding of social
47 justice, the profession must reconcile the collective responsibility this requires with its
48 longstanding belief in individual self-determination. This is no easy task, either intellectually or
49 practically. Environmental justice is a precondition for all people to exercise agency and improve
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3 their individual and collective well-being in a sustainable manner - goals that are certainly
4 compatible with social work's mission and values.
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8 In the future, social work educators and scholars must grapple with such questions as:
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10 How can community practitioners enable people to understand the complementary relationship
11 between their individual interests and those of the broader society? How can clinical social
12 workers incorporate environmental concerns into their services while resolving the tension
13 between individual autonomy and collective well-being? A possible solution lies in
14 acknowledging that all people need and want a sense of place and belonging and that these
15 desires are best realized by integrating a respect for the natural environment into every aspect of
16 their lives (Dominelli, 2012).
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ⁱ See, for example, the Greek myth of Prometheus, considered a martyr for giving fire to humankind, and the frequent statements in *Genesis* giving humans dominion over the Earth.

ⁱⁱ Ironically, Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which placed humans at the top of the evolutionary hierarchy, also introduced the concept of ecology.