

Towards understanding attitudes and practices in relation to sustainability and environmental concerns: responsibilities in professional education and curricula.

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Research project

- How are environmental concerns and sustainability issues (in the broadest sense of the terms) being addressed in qualifying professional education in Schools of Social Work across the UK?
- Whether or not environmental issues are a consideration in selecting and arranging practice (field-based) placements?

Research project (2)

- The project was undertaken during ongoing developments in understanding present and future outcomes of environmental changes (for example, State of Nature Report, 2013); also against a background of developments for social work education, including the implementation of reforms to the education and practice curricula.

Research project (3)

- Underpinned by the knowledge that many service users and carers live in poverty; suffer from poor health; live in environmentally degraded surroundings (Wright, 2010); and do not have regular access to green spaces; some have no access.

Research project (4)

- Surveys with both multiple and single choice questions were sent to key staff in every social work department in an HEI in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Despite the relatively small number of returns, findings reveal some significant commonalities, both positive and negative, as well as significant differences;
- An extensive body of social work literature and research on environmental concerns was studied, and I and my colleagues believe this project's findings will contribute to the profession's knowledge base (forthcoming).

Today' s presentation

- Not describing the results in full; instead examining a few questions which are relevant for today' s discussion;
- Then, briefly exploring links between attitudes and practices;
- Finally, discussion of responsibilities of educators in relation to environmental concerns and professional education and curricula. How might we begin to change things?

Question 1

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree
The effects of environmental issues such as climate change and resource depletion add additional layers of oppression upon individuals, families and communities already experiencing environmental inequalities. Environmental issues are now a core issue for social work.	28.3%	43.3%	23.3%
Environmental issues are a collective problem; we are all equal stakeholders in maintaining healthy ecosystems. Theorists such as Peeters (2011) justifiably call for social workers to form alliances with service users, carers, environmental organisations and governments to address the need for structural, cultural and social change in relation to environmental issues.	30.0%	50.0%	20.0%
Environmental issues are outside the social work remit; it is about the choice which individuals and nation states make. Environment belongs to politics; it is an issue for legislators and social policy makers, not social workers.	6.7%	13.3%	75.0%

Question 7

- In relation to the question “How do you now regard environmental issues in relation to the content of the academic social work curriculum?”: 3.3% respondents considered them “insignificant”; 23.3% respondents considered them “remotely significant”; 48.3% respondents considered them “significant”; 20.0% respondents considered them “highly significant” and 3.3% respondents considered them “crucial”.

Question 11

- Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement on a scale of 1 to 3 (1 being greatest, 3 being least) with a range of statements in relation to the comment: “Due to environmental concerns, some students do not wish to drive whilst undertaking social work placements”. The responses (in percentages of those that answered this question) are given in the table below.
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Question 11

	Greatest agreement	Least agreement
Absurd – social workers are essential car users and are already discriminated against by restrictive measures taken against cars.	22.7%	50.0%
Students would have difficulty with certain interventions and other colleagues have to compensate for the limitations which might occur.	55.8%	18.6%
Good idea but totally impracticable	36.1%	30.6%
Should be encouraged	41.2%	23.5%
This is an example of a sustainable solution to an intractable problem – one that must be embraced.	23.1%	42.3%

Question 11

- For Q11 (students not driving on placement): the proportion that agreed least with this being absurd was 50%; a small majority of respondents (55.8%) felt that students would have difficulty and compensation would be needed from other colleagues. However 41.2% felt that this should be encouraged, with respondents split – but not too far apart - on it being a ‘good idea but totally impracticable.’

Question 13

- When asked if social work schools or departments in HEIs should allocate placements only within social work agencies which have and adhere to strict policies on environmental issues, 8.3% of respondents indicated “yes”; whilst 83.3% of respondents indicated “no”.

Question 18

- When asked, 15% of respondents indicated that they believe a generic standard to represent environmental issues across the entire social work “work” environment to be “necessary”; whilst 35.0% of respondents believed it to be “appropriate”; 31.7% believed it to be “impractical” and 8.3% of respondents believed it to “unsustainable”.

Why choose these questions?

- They are similar to reactions and responses frequently found in many general surveys, where concerns are expressed, but regulation is resisted, such as:
- ‘Of course, these are important issues. It’s so awful about the destruction of the planet, and I understand that climate change is caused by human beings, but I don’t want to be told I have to give up.....plane travel/car use/other...’

Some ideas about attitudes and practices

- ‘the complex obstacles between information and action....’
- ‘the dynamics of knowing and not knowing...’
- ‘the essence of denial and bystanding...an active looking away, a sense of a situation so utterly hopeless and incomprehensible that we cannot bear to think about it’
- (Cohen, 2001).

Some ideas about attitudes and practices (2)

- All these quotations are about people witnessing – or refusing to witness - various situations of harm, ill-treatment or worse towards others (example cp).
- A sense of paralysis pervades these quotations; neither heart nor brain appears to be capable of functioning properly, and neither emotion nor knowledge can assist in understanding.

Some ideas about attitudes and practices (3)

- How much more difficult is it, how much worse is it, to admit that we ourselves have been the cause of harm, ill-treatment or worse?
- That we have contributed to environmental damage and climate change?
- And that we are still doing it?

The depressive position

- Melanie Klein (1937) developed the concept of the depressive position, where, with some emotional maturity, we come to accept ourselves as we are, both good and bad, and we accept others as they are, too;
- We can acknowledge our capacities for care and concern; we're grateful towards others for their care and concern for us; we can acknowledge our capacities to cause harm.

Guilt and reparation

- We can acknowledge personal responsibility when we do wrong; we feel guilt and want to make reparation;
- So, if we can move beyond the paralysis described by Cohen, and move into the depressive position, rather than wanting ‘it all’ (air travel *and* an unharmed planet), we can accept that we will still make mistakes or unwise choices.... and face our responsibility for damage caused and make reparation, in whatever way we choose.

Doing something

- Doing *something* is to make reparation for causing harm by doing nothing, or for actively causing harm;
- It is *not* being falsely optimistic that we can overturn this (harm to the planet), but quietly acknowledging what we've done, and resolve to keep doing our best;
- Not grand gestures, but reparative ones.

Responsibilities of educators

- Marx' s (1888/1998) belief that: 'the educator must themselves be educated' ;
- To demonstrate how, in professional education, learning and research could assist in moving from present conditions, understandings and knowledge of environmental concerns, to other (and more grounded) understandings and knowledge, and to action for change where it is required (Bekerman, 2008), so that lives may be lived more sustainably.

Responsibilities of educators (2)

- Examining the structures and underlying assumptions of current professional curricula;
- Educators must begin changing the terms of debates about environmental issues, examining the attitudes and practices of the richer nations of the global north;
- There is no ‘view from nowhere’ (Nagel, 1986) that can be justified within teaching and research in an unequal world (Cox et al, 2008; Unterhalter and Carpentier, 2010).

How...

- To generate more complex understandings of environmental and sustainability issues, educators must do more than ‘add in’ ;
- Environmental concerns and sustainability must be integrated into all aspects of curricula, not just one module;
- Cross-disciplinary professional education where possible, moving out of silos, so wide-ranging relevance is perceived.

How...(2)

- Not only on professional education courses, but university-wide;
- Internal committees and groups;
- Use leverage and what tickles...;
- As above, our own (reparative) actions: finding ways to walk a/the walk – our engagement with students will then be perfused with some authenticity, rather than hollow rhetoric – exhortations.

Deconstructing everyday actions

- For people in the global north nations – and many of us in them, meeting our own needs at the expense of others – exhortations about damage caused to others or other places means little in the abstract;
- Specific examples: switching on a light; or eating a prawn sandwich from the canteen... and unravelling the connections (O' Brien, 2008; Cox and O' Brien, 2014 forthcoming).

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Reclaiming...

- ... universities' moral purposes and principles of social action, social responsibility and social engagement (Greenwood and Levin, 2003; Nixon, 2008);
- Re-connecting with communities (Calhoun, 2008; 2009) – all of this requiring imagination and determination;
- In these endeavours there will be ambivalence about how to achieve desired changes and struggles to achieve solidarity.