Radical self-care for social workers in the global climate crisis

Abstract: Social work entities around the world are increasingly highlighting professional responsibilities for addressing the global climate crisis. Gradual environmental degradation, more extreme climate change events, and related environmental injustices affect individuals and communities every day. Often, social workers experience vicarious trauma from work with those immediately impacted. Working within the context of the global climate crisis brings further risk. Social workers may be personally impacted, and/or experiencing our own challenges, such as climate anxiety and eco-grief. Thus, radical self-care is a dire need as social workers promote sustainable communities and environments and seek ecological justice for all. This paper discusses the health and mental health impacts of the compounding factors of the climate crisis, modern technology, and current political contexts. Activism for change and eco-therapeutic strategies are presented as radical self-care for social workers, in both academic and practice-based settings. These strategies are essential for recognizing, legitimizing, and addressing the need for radical self-care practices in the global climate crisis.

If we take a close look at the Earth as an elaborate ecosystem in which we live, we realize that it is beautiful and can produce all that is needed to survive *and* it is able to use all the waste naturally produced for fuel as it is recycled within the ecosystem. Before we delve into the main topic of this paper, radical self-care for social workers, we would like to start off by offering our gratitude to the historical and current caretakers of our planet and to 'Mother Earth' as our self-care is, in actuality, a re-acknowledging and re-connection to all the elements of care she provides us.

Now, as humans, we are part of the intricate and interconnected ecosystem of Earth. Some people continue to live each day, intentionally mindful of these intimate and inextricable connections, however, many people have drifted far from harmony with nature, considering humans as removed from or somehow outside of nature. These mindsets, or worldviews, have led to over-consumption and more waste than our planet can handle, as it is toxic and far exceeds the capacity of our ecosystem to regenerate itself. Even the increased efforts of sustainable technology cannot keep up with our current rate of consumption and waste and are themselves becoming part of our unsustainable waste stream.

We humans have exacerbated normal patterns of climate change, creating a climate crisis with increasing frequency and intensity of natural disasters, environmental degradation, and related environmental injustices (IPCC, n.d.). Environmental injustice occurs when some people 1) shoulder more of the burdens from, and risks of, environmental degradation and disasters (such as having to take jobs in toxic factories or having to live in high risk areas for flooding and/or landslides) and/or 2) do not have the same enjoyment of or access to environmental benefits (such as green spaces for mental and physical health or access to clean water) (Bullard, 1994; CSWE, n.d.). Recent examples include Typhoon Manghut which hit parts of the

Philippines and China, and Hurricane Florence which hit the east coast of the United States of America (USA) in September 2018. Both storms severely impacted those individuals and communities already oppressed, marginalized or in vulnerable living conditions. For instance, prior to such disasters many lived in housing that was insufficient to withstand significant storms and flooding and were less likely to be able to evacuate. After such events they were also less able to recover. These vulnerabilities are often the direct result of economic constraints and/or because they are being further neglected as others are prioritized, often due to environmental racism (Bullard, 1994). Communities such as these are additionally at risk as their social and ecological coping strategies are undermined. For example, people who previously found self-care through connections—both spiritual and non-spiritual—to community and nature may suffer additional health and mental health problems as their environment is devastated in the face of disasters and environmental degradation (Grise-Owens, Miller, & Owens, 2014; Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

Since we only have one planet, and considering we are over-consuming and over-polluting, it means we are currently in a climate crisis. Like a frog in a pot of boiling water, if things heat up gradually it may not notice, and in the end, it will die. It is becoming clear however that we can no longer ignore the global climate crisis that exists and is demanding the attention of every person on this planet, especially social workers. Taking action is following in the footsteps of pioneers in social work as they addressed similar issues in various ways. Developing parks and recreation for health and mental health of those moving to cities during the industrial revolution, helping labor unions to address safety issues in their built environments of factories, and working with waste management and sanitation programs are historical roles in pioneer social work practice (Powers, 2016).

Many professional social work entities and organizations are calling social workers to take action in addressing the climate crisis. For instance, *The Global Agenda of Social Work and Social Development* highlights our professional role to actively engage with promoting sustainable communities and environments (IASSW, ICSW, & IFSW, 2010). Increasingly, social work scholars and practitioners are partnering with communities to create best practices and curricular resources on these topics (e.g., Rinkel & Powers, 2017). Social work education is also becoming more explicit about including these issues in educational standards. For example, the Council on Social Work Education in the USA includes environmental justice as a core component in the national educational policy and accreditation standards (EPAS) since 2015 (CSWE, n.d.). These professional mandates to address the climate crisis create even more reason to promote self-care for social workers.

In this context of a global climate crisis, there is a dire need for radical self-care for social workers (Powers, 2017). In this paper we begin by bringing awareness to the compounding stressors to social workers from the climate crisis, modern technology, and the global political climate. We then highlight radical self-care solutions which combine elements of traditional self-care, with which most social workers are familiar (e.g., boundary setting, respite), with elements of activism for social and ecological change. We also present tools for radical self-care such as various eco-therapeutic strategies for creating links with the natural environment, and the 'Sustainable, Life-enhancing Pace' model, an innovative coping model for personal health and well-being (Powers, 2017; Daley, 2003). Finally, we conclude this paper with implications for social work education and practice as we note how these tools and strategies can be used by social workers in their own lives, as well as when working with students, colleagues, and service users (i.e., clients and/or communities).

The Dire Need for Radical Self-care

The International Federation of Social Work conveys the importance of self-care by including it in the "Statement of Ethical Principals and Professional Integrity", Section 3.3: "social workers have a duty to take the necessary steps to care for themselves professionally and personally in the workplace, in their private lives and in society" (IFSW, n.d.). National social work organizations have echoed this mandate in their code of ethics and statements on professionalism (e.g., Self-Help UK, 2017; NASW, 2016). In light of these professional mandates, self-care is becoming more frequently discussed and formally taught for social work students and in professional development workshops (Carter & Barnett, 2015; Grise-Owens et al., 2016; Powers, 2017). However, when self-care is mentioned, it is not uncommon to hear it presented with the statement "you can't give from an empty well". We argue that this is true, but if left there, it is a single-sided reason for taking care of one's self solely to care for others and does not consider the intrinsic value of the social worker as an individual. It is important that social workers understand that self-care is not merely about being better equipped for one's professional roles and responsibilities, but that each social worker has their own intrinsic value and deserves to be cared for (by self and by others). In addition, while we promote well-being and self-care for our service users, we often neglect to apply these daily habits and tips to our own daily practices. This may be due to the fast-paced cultures in which we live and work, forcing us to always be producing and not "just being" (Epstein, 2001), meaning we forget that we are 'human beings' not 'human doings'. This, also, may be due to the notion that our role as care-giver has become fused with our identity (Wu & Pooler, 2014). Indeed, we need normalize help-seeking, whether that is to take time for caring for oneself or reaching out to others for help. Self-care does not mean one need be entirely self-reliant.

Social work is among the highest risk professions for stress, burnout, and job turnover rates (Cox & Steiner, 2013; Miller et al., 2017; Smullens, 2015; Travis, Lizano & Mor Barak, 2016). Studies suggest that social workers experience high reports of stress, burnout, negative views on work and work-based relationships, anxiety, depression, work strain, lack of job satisfaction, and engage in unhealthy coping mechanisms (Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005; Travis, Lizano & Mor Barak, 2016; Tham, 2007; Tham & Meagher, 2009). In addition to the unhealthy impacts to social work practitioners, the impact of turnover on service users can be devastating because front line workers play an important role in determining the quality of care in practice (Chen & Scannapieco, 2010; Ellet et al., 2007; Nissly, Mor Barak & Levin, 2005; Weaver et al., 2007). Munro (2011) acknowledges that if the work environment does not help support social workers, then the potential for turnover increases, thus radical reform is needed to give weight to the importance of the emotional requirements of the work. All of these risks are further exacerbated by three global stressors, which we will elaborate on below, the climate crisis, modern technology, and current political administrations.

Global Stressors

The Climate Crisis.

The climate crisis, as discussed briefly above, creates additional dangers to our health and well-being and has made it imperative for social workers to join in the global, interdisciplinary responses. Grise-Owens, Miller and Owens (2014) link this to the growing need for a meta practice to be incorporated into social work practice as we begin to think about the "interdependent global considerations" when working at a local level (p. 49). This is of particular concern to social workers as environmental issues disproportionately affect vulnerable and marginalized populations. Many environmental injustices not only create dangerous or toxic

environments, but also create political unrest and violence as people vie for resources such as land, clean water, or food. These issues are producing and/or exacerbating environmental injustices for vulnerable populations, including forced migration (Powers, Schmitz, Matthews, & Nsonwu, 2018).

In addition, the climate crisis may create ramifications for social workers such as vicarious trauma, personal eco-grief and climate anxiety (Canty, 2017; Cunsolo & Landman, 2017, Rinkel & Powers, 2017). These occur when we experience the negative impact the climate crisis is having on our planet and the people and places we care about so deeply. These stressors are often compounded by the availability of information about how climate change is affecting communities around the world. For example, one social worker from Puerto Rico, who is a member of the Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network', said she was experiencing her own personal loss as a member of the community, as well as vicarious trauma as she worked on disaster recovery after Hurricane Maria. She indicated that people do not even want to come out of their homes as they are traumatized and suffering from PTSD and depression. Her service users anguished, 'all the green is gone', referring to the loss of the luscious vegetation once prominent in their tropical island home.

Modern Technology.

Modern technology, the second compounding global stressor, often heightens and intensifies knowledge of and urgency felt to address injustices. The availability of technology has increased 'working' hours due to constant interaction and connection. For example, even when a social worker is 'off duty' from work, they may engage with technology in the form of emails, social media, and news outlets. This could potentially result in feeling the need to 'turn on' their social worker professional roles and act on the issues they are confronted with during

their intended times for rest, refueling, and/or socializing with loved ones. This could lead to compassion fatigue, stress, and potentially burnout (McFadden, Campbell & Taylor, 2015).

Current Political Administrations.

Finally, many current political administrations around the world negatively impact our service users, not to mention our own livelihoods. This intensifies the need for services at all levels of practice as resources, including social work jobs, are diminishing. In some countries, national and international policies are going in a direction that are contrary to social work ethics and values. This has created an increasingly urgent need for social justice work that addresses unethical policies. However, under these political administrations, social workers run additional risks of becoming vulnerable to activist burnout, a condition which affects individuals' well-being, as well as a social movements' ability to be sustained (Chen & Gorski, 2015). In addition, with political administrations moving slowly in dictating how they will work to combat climate change, it is becoming clear how stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, PTSD, and feelings of hopelessness or inefficacy are becoming more prevalent within the social work community. For example, when President Bolsonaro recently came into political power in Brazil, one social worker who is a member of the Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network', lamented, "I'm having trouble coming to terms with the fact this is actually happening. He will have absolute power to destroy the environment and indigenous people when he comes to power". Another member expressed similar sentiments and showed signs of PTSD as she discussed how the Trump Administration in the USA impacted her as she endured not only the stress of having to fight the global climate crisis, but also fight the daily barrage of fake news, incompetent leaders put in charge of environmental programs, and the consequences of unjust policy decisions—enacted or terminated— that exacerbate the climate crisis.

Radical Self-care Solutions for Social Workers

Considering the three global stressors we discussed above, social workers are moving towards professional roles to address the climate crisis through activities such as, increasing their use of technology for campaigns for social and environmental justice, and taking political action, even running for political offices themselves (Bent-Goodley & Hopps, 2017). Each of these activities are examples of what we mean by 'radical self-care'. Activities such as political warfare, activism and working for the collective good are empowering and strongly related to overall well-being (Gilster, 2012). When social workers participate in creating positive community change, both globally and locally, they become part of the solution in reducing the stressors that created their need for self-care in the first place. For example, we, the authors, see our teaching as an activity that is a big part of our own radical self-care as we know we are helping to equip future social workers to address a variety of social and ecological problems facing the planet they will inherit. Therefore, we argue that radical self-care combines elements of traditional self-care (e.g., boundary setting, respite), with elements of activism for change. We will explore strategies for these elements in the following sections.

Activism as Radical Self-care.

Social work is committed to, and in many cases founded on, political activism and challenging social injustice. Therefore, we are also impacted by and committed to being involved in macro and meta practice (McBeath, 2016; Grise-Owens, Miller & Owens, 2014). Radical self-care through activism has the potential to address some of the stressors social workers face in their daily jobs, especially as related of the global climate crisis. Advances in modern technology (including social media) for sharing information and engaging in various levels of political activism have increased and intensified. There are both strengths and concerns related to this,

and its impact on health and well-being for social workers and others (Pyles, 2018). Technology and, for some, social media, is such a prevalent component to everyday personal and professional lives that it is important to reflect on how to stay engaged in technology without it contributing to burnout. In fact, activists who use modern technology as part of their own radical self-care are also beginning to caution others to the potential stresses of online activism (e.g., the blog, 'Rest for Resistance'). The self-care that is needed to combat over stimulation by technology will likely have to include more intentional boundary making and ensuring there are social media 'safe spaces'. Such safe spaces are places where there is a sense of solidarity with other activists through a sense of community, empowerment and support, not a combative space.

Organizational Membership as Radical Self-care.

There are personal and professional benefits from increased involvement with professional social work organizations and advocacy networks (McBeath, 2016). Being a member of the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) for example, not only allows us to connect with others to learn about social work best practices around the world and for professional solidarity building, but such membership also provide us with staff and leaders who advocate on our behalf to elevate the profession so we have better recognition and professional rights, and to lobby political administrations on behalf of and with our service users.

In addition to formal organizations, in-formal networks are also beneficial. One such advocacy network was recently formed within the social work profession to promote the roles and responsibilities in addressing the climate crisis, the 'Green/Ecosocial Work Collaborative Network'. This network connects social workers around the world on Twitter, Facebook, and Google Groups, and is administered by the authors as part of our own radical self-care. This network is a tool for radical self-care as it provides members with solidarity through a shared

commitment and allows for sharing resources and networking for advocacy purposes. For example, one network member recently shared:

> Thank you for the encouraging words. I, too, became discouraged (and still am in some respects) given the recent climate reports and the timeline of just 12 years to reverse the complete eradication of coral reefs and our ice caps. We have to remain resistant to these changes (whatever that looks like to our communities), and collectively, we can make change. I know it's hard, but solidarity is what binds us in struggle--we all rise together, and no one is left behind. We can't give up. (Joel Izlar)

Traditional self-care and Radical Self-care.

Most social workers are at least familiar with, if not always great at implementing, traditional strategies for self-care such as boundary setting with service users and work responsibilities and making sure to take respite in order to avoid illnesses and/or heal. Intentionally and consistently creating opportunities for rest as well as engaging in activities that offer distraction, personal growth, developing and maintaining sustainable intimate, family and interpersonal relationships are ethical imperatives for those in helping professions, such as social work (Pearlman & Caringi, 2009). As renowned environmental and political activists, Audre Lorde, decried, "caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (origin unknown). One such traditional self-care activity within the context of the global climate crisis includes reading books that help one grow their knowledge of environmental issues, which in turn helps to normalize and/or address the feelings one may be experiencing (e.g., *Mourning Nature* (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017), *Ecological and Social Healing: Multicultural Women's Voices* (Canty, 2017), *Coming Back to Life* (Macy & Young Brown, 2014)). Other activities within traditional self-care practices are also considered part of

radical self-care as we slow down to grow organic produce, shop at local markets, prepare and enjoy healthier, home cooked meals, and get to know neighbors; these are all aspects of the environmental activism movement know as 'the degrowth approach' (see https://degrowth.org/). Indeed, many self-care benefits come from slowing our lives to match the pace of nature, as renowned philosopher Lao Tzu noted, "Nature does not hurry, yet everything is accomplished". This is just one example of an ecologically-conscious self-care strategy.

Ecologically-conscious Strategies for Radical Self-care.

Ecologically-conscious strategies for radical self-care are centered on the belief that humans have an innate connection to the natural world that needs to be nurtured in order to promote not only the wellbeing of the humans, but also the well-being of the natural world (Hinds & Jordan, 2016; Macy & Young Brown, 2014; Wilson, 1993). Thus, radical self-care includes being mindful and becoming conscious of these perspectives. It is the re-acknowledging and re-connection to all the elements of Mother Earth as we remember that we are in an intimate, reciprocal relationship with nature. Ecologically-conscious self-care includes a variety of strategies social work practitioners can use in supporting positive physical and mental health and wellbeing to address problems resulting from the global stressors of the climate crisis, political context, and modern technology (McGeeney, 2016; Williams, 2017).

Ecotherapy. Ecotherapy is seen as an umbrella term for physical and psychological interventions that have an ecological or nature-based consciousness or intent. It acknowledges the important role of nature and addresses the human-nature relationship (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Doherty, 2016) and can encompass a wide variety of activities, methods or interventions (Engstrom, 2018). For instance, using outdoor spaces in therapy sessions can relax a person and invite them to reclaim a more natural pace in life (McGeeny, 2016; Powers, 2017). Sometimes,

people who have experienced trauma in, or regarding, natural outdoor spaces can use eco-therapeutic practices to reclaim their connection to nature and heal, such an indigenous women's group who walk the Trail of Tears (Schlutz et al., 2016). Ecotherapy can positively impact a service user, as well as the social worker when with service users or when engaging with nature on their own (McGeeny, 2016). Even the seemingly simple gesture of moving a helping session outdoors could have an impact on not only the service user, but the quality of the service user and helper relationship, as both reap benefits of time spent in nature (Jordan & Hinds, 2016).

Hart (2013) also describes a form of ecotherapy known as ecological drama therapy. Ecological drama therapists can support ecological activism as they integrate drama therapy methods to promote an understanding of our responsibility to all peoples and forms of life. Horticultural therapy and wilderness work are two other eco-therapeutic interventions that help people re-connect with nature (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Powers, 2016). Within these settings, people are not only working to improve their environments, but are also beginning to reconnect with each other and with nature as a way to embrace better health for themselves and their community. Spending time in nature has been found to include a wide variety of potential benefits, including relieving some symptoms of anxiety and depression (Buzzell & Chalquist, 2009; Jordan & Hinds, 2016; McGeeny, 2016).

Eco-therapeutic self-care can be tailored to each individual's interests and comfort levels. For example, it does not always have to mean booking a wilderness retreat or going camping for a weekend. It can include moving your fitness routine outside, starting a gardening practice, or volunteering with animals. Practices could also include taking a walk in a forest or an urban park, sitting near a lake, watching wildlife from a bench, or visiting a beach or river. Eco-therapeutic practices can be indoors or outdoors; both spaces can help someone recognize the

critical connection of humans with the natural environment. For instance, if indoors, one could change a room to incorporate more natural lighting, spend quiet time near windows, practice mindfulness meditation while holding an item from nature, enjoy time with a loving pet, and/or incorporate more plants or nature items in decor. Finally, ecotherapy not only incorporates the natural environment into the therapeutic relationship, but also asks ecologically conscious questions such as: What is my place in the world? What particular gifts do I bring? What does a healthy ecosystem require from humans? Carefully reflecting on such questions may create a shift in worldview or mindset (Rinkel & Powers, 2017).

The Sustainable, Life-enhancing Pace Model. Another ecologically conscious self-care practice is the Sustainable, Life-enhancing Pace model (Powers, 2017; Daley, 2003). This practice is situated within the degrowth approach (see https://degrowth.org/) and is presented here as an example of an innovative and holistic model of radical self-care. This model is not only about traditional self-care practices, but also includes issues of intentional and mindful use of resources, time, material possessions, and choices to create healthy priorities, resulting in a plan for implementing a sustainable, life-enhancing pace (Powers, 2017; Daley, 2003). It is possible to have a life pace that is sustainable, but not really life-enhancing; and, it is possible to have a life pace that is life-enhancing, but not at all sustainable. Thus, it takes much intentionality to create a life pace that is both sustainable and life-enhancing. One needs to spend time and mindfully examine many interrelated facets of life to create an individualized plan. For example, one may contemplate: remembering that we are 'human-beings' not 'human-doings', practicing an attitude of gratitude, practicing daily time for mindfulness/spiritual centering, focusing on the things we are becoming, practicing preventative care, instead of dealing with

emergencies that arise from neglect, reconnecting with nature daily, saying "no" to things/people that drain us and "yes" to those that reinvigorate us (Powers, 2017; Engstrom, 2018).

Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

As social workers, it is crucial that we are avid about our own well-being and develop a plan for our own radical self-care (Macy & Young Brown, 2014; Powers, 2017). The strategies presented in this paper could be used as part of explicit training for social workers in practice-based and academic settings. Social workers should be able to recognize and legitimize the need for radical self-care practices for themselves, their students, social work colleagues, and service users. Specifically, we must acknowledge our grief over the loss of nature and the related climate injustices to people and planet and ensure that we allow for the time and legitimacy to appropriately mourn these (Cunsolo & Landman, 2017). Educators should not only teach strategies but need to also become models of self-care and create a culture where self-care is normalized and legitimized. The radical self-care strategies presented in this paper can be offered to service users, as well as utilized in our personal lives to enhance our well-being and to better equip us for our professional roles.

Social workers are already utilizing the strategies presented in this paper. For example, ecotherapy is being incorporated into a current, community-engaged research project spearheaded by Author A. The project connects governmental parks and recreation services with local community members and volunteer groups to enhance community parks in underserved areas with marginalized populations. This particular project is focused on senior citizens. During participatory data analysis with the community, it was found that they wanted improvements to outdoor walking trails to make them more accessible to older adults with mobility issues, outdoor spaces to socialize, trees for shade, and flowers for beautification. They also indicated

interest in having raised beds for gardening that are accessible to people with limited mobility or those in wheelchairs. All these enhancements would promote eco-therapeutic health benefits through the re-connection with nature in their park. In addition, the project team is consulting with local gardening groups to learn about native plants and trees for use in landscaping and creating a plan that not only benefits the community, but the physical environment itself (e.g., planting pollinator gardens, making permeable walkways to allow for rainwater to be absorbed by the local vegetation and not run off into storm drains). A wide variety of similar practice examples can be found in the IFSW workbook series by Rinkel and Powers (2017).

Conclusion

In the context of the global climate crisis with the related ecological injustices, the volatile political climate, and the negative impact of modern technology, we urgently need social responses that can better equip us to respond to the changing global environment. In addition, we need partnerships, intentional and committed community engagement, and creative ways to empower individuals and communities to strengthen their assets, including radical self-care coping strategies.

The array of radical self-care practices presented in this paper may be useful tools not only for social workers' own benefit, but also for their loved ones and the service users with which they work. As social workers experience their own eco-grief and climate anxieties, in addition to the normal stressors of working with vulnerable and oppressed service users, they may find that engaging in activism can help to assuage their stress levels. When social workers prioritize and implement radical self-care, they will likely thrive both professionally and personally. Through radical self-care, we can become people who embrace healing and peace within ourselves— and then we can offer it to others and to our beautiful Mother Earth.

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