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Natural Connections: Social Work's Role in Mending Human and Environmental Relationships

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Natural Connections: Social Work's Role in Mending
Human and Environmental Relationships

by

Leah Prussia

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University | University of Saint Thomas
School of Social Work

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Abstract

Just as seasons shift and migration patterns modify in response to human impact, so too must social work. Along with the human contingency silenced by oppression, climate change disproportionately burdens the voiceless: the rooted, Nibi – water, Aki – Earth, winged, four-legged, swimmers, and crawlers. Though the natural world has become part of social work's discourse in recent decades, it is time to move beyond contemplative words and take action. This banded dissertation consists of three scholarly products that explore the past and present state of social work's relationship with the natural environment through the frames of Indigenous knowledge and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) and suggests a means to return to where *we* (humanity and social work) started – the beginning. Product one reviews the history of disconnection between humans and the environment, applies Indigenous wisdom and RCT to define social work's role with the natural world, and reframes environmental rights as human rights. Product two is an exploratory archival study that examines the question: what was the relationship of early social work with the natural environment. The research utilizes Indigenous methodology and RCT to analyze data from three New York City Settlement houses. Product three summarizes information from a presentation that took place on July 7, 2018, at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development in Dublin, Ireland. The presentation outlines a conceptual framework that combines Indigenous wisdom and Western knowledge into a model to heal self and the environment by listening to and honoring the body's innate ability to repair in collaboration with the natural world. This scholarship is a call to the profession to welcome and assume its role in mending the rift between humans and the environment.

Keywords: anthropocene, environmental rights, Indigenous knowledge, natural environment, relational-cultural theory, settlement house, social work history, solastalgia, somatic literacy

Acknowledgements and Dedication

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This work is dedicated to those that give so much and ask nothing: the fliers, swimmers, crawlers, four-leggeds, Aki- Earth, Nibi – water, rooted relatives, and the next seven generations.

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Natural Connections: Social Work's Role in Mending Human and Environmental Relationships

Both humans and the natural world are under ongoing threat by some individuals in power that foster alliances with greed, willful ignorance, and disregard for life. Oppressive acts impact humanity and all inhabitants of Earth. According to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, n.d.), the United States (U.S.) and China together are responsible for producing approximately 40% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions (Wang & Cheng, 2018). In 2017, the 45th president of the U.S. announced that the second leading producer of greenhouse gas emissions would be withdrawing from the Paris Agreement effective 2020 (Milman, 2018). The Paris Agreement on climate mitigation is a commitment by countries to monitor and reduce their impact on global climate change (UNFCCC, 2018). Besides withdrawal from the accord, the U.S. has proposed to rollback protections for endangered species, increase logging on public land, and start offshore drilling in the Arctic (Greshko et al., 2019). All of the shortsighted actions negatively touch the most vulnerable: oppressed human groups and the natural world. At a time when environmental action and human response is crucial, the social work profession needs to recognize the knowledge, skills, and values it holds in restoring the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Social work has lingered on the periphery of scholarly discourse related to its role with the natural environment for a few decades (Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012; McKinnon, 2008; Zapf, 2010). Recent initiatives in social work have recognized the profession's role and have translated academic thought into beginning action (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013; Miller & Hayward, 2014). One clear response was CSWE's sanctioning of the Committee on Environmental Justice in 2015 (CSWE, n.d.). The committee is responsible for initiatives surrounding green social work and falls under the purview of the Commissions for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice and Global

Social Work Education. Shortly after development, an environmental justice competency was added to the latest release of CSWE's Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2015). The Grand Challenges for Social Work were outlined that same year by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW, 2015]. One of the Grand Challenges includes the impetus to "create social responses to a changing environment" (AASWSW, 2015, p. 2). Though these action steps are forward momentum for the profession to expand to a person *and* environment approach, it is anthropocentric and falls short of protecting the natural world impacted by poor policy, for-profit negligence, and individual malfeasance.

This banded dissertation seeks to contribute to the profession's movement toward people *and* the natural environment through the addition of three products that aid in historical understanding and theoretical coherence of full inclusion of all that inhabit Aki - Earth. The scholarship examines the intersection of the history and involvement of early social work with the natural environment and suggests ways to further the profession in its integration of the natural world in its mission and purpose. By illuminating the synthesis of social work, nature, Indigenous knowledge, and RCT, the profession may re-embrace what has been missing from the *formula* for necessary personal and planetary healing - relationships.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this scholarship is guided by both Indigenous knowledge and Western ways of knowing. The natural environment will be included in the conceptual framework as an integral living system, a system that one depends upon not only to survive, but also thrive in this world. The import of acknowledgement and inclusion of the natural environment in a profession dedicated to serving those who are marginalized by those in power will be illustrated through the synthesis of traditional Indigenous teachings and RCT.

Andrew Favorite, Gaawaabaabiganikaag (White Earth) Elder, frequently shared, “We are all indigenous to somewhere” (personal communication, Fall 2007). These words convey that at one time, all humans were in relationship with the natural world. Humans were students of the environment, learning from the plant and animal worlds and respecting relationships with all of creation (Deloria, 1999; Johnston, 1992; Johnston, 2004). Humans learned about medicines from their relatives (e.g. animals and plants), along with basic principles of *give* and *take* (Kimmerer, 2013; Peacock & Wisuri, 2001). At one time, mutuality was inherent to the daily interaction between all human groups around the world and the environment.

According to Gerhard Lenski's Critical Theory (1984), as some humans began exercising greater power over life forms through technological *advances* (domestication of animals, genetic modification of the plant world, harnessing water through the use of dams, aerial chemical trails to shift weather patterns), mutual appreciation and relationship with all that lives began to diminish. Those embracing the new ways gradually shifted from eco-mindfulness to ego-mindedness. What Western society embraced as evolution and advancement, the natural world experienced as loss via extinction, polluted waterways, and deforestation (Killingsworth & Bao, 2015).

Western ways of knowing and interacting amongst humans followed a similar devolutionary trajectory of ego and disconnection until the mid-1970s, when the conception of *another* way of knowing – a way of knowing similar to indigenous teachings began to recognize the healing capacity of connection (Miller, 1976). Relational-Cultural Theory was birthed from ideas generated by Jean Baker Miller's *Toward a New Psychology of Women* (1976) and further nurtured through collaboration with Jordan, Stiver, and Surrey (Comstock et al., 2008). Upon maturation, RCT embraced feminist ideals that challenged the separate self model by positing that through affiliation (connection), mutuality (power with), and authenticity, individuals thrive.

Miller and Stiver (1997) broadened awareness regarding the impact of growth fostering relationships by further delineating the benefits of affiliation via the 5 Good Things (zest, sense of worth, clarity, productivity, and a desire for more connection). Banks (2011) augmented RCT's psychosocial model by including the science of connection through summarizing research in the neurosciences and concluding that humans truly are hard-wired to connect. Norton (2009) on the other hand is the first to introduce RCT as a frame for including the natural world by bridging ecopsychology and social work approaches. Norton (2012) furthers the support of RCT and the environment by proposing an eco-social approach, which recognizes feminist thought and anti-oppressive approaches.

This scholarship augments Norton (2009) by acknowledging the role of Indigenous teachings on relationship and expanding natural rights as human rights. By integrating Indigenous teachings and theoretical tenets of RCT, it is the intent of this author to provide increased coherence to understanding the role of the natural environment in early social work. The author through the banded dissertation hopes to provide further language and tools for the profession to move forward in advancing its role in collaborating with the environment for personal and planetary healing.

Summary of Scholarship Products

The goal of this scholarship is to highlight the knowledge and wisdom that history brings to ameliorating the *wound* between many humans and the natural environment by turning to Indigenous teachings and early social work for guidance. Another focus of this work is to synthesize Indigenous and RCT tenets to further the profession's commitment to the natural world. This banded dissertation is comprised of three works including a conceptual framework, historical research, and a practical model that address the present imbalance and fractured relationship between humans and the environment. The first product is a conceptual piece that

encourages the profession to embrace natural rights as human rights by accessing the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous teachings and RCT. The second piece is exploratory archival research examining social work's beginnings in the settlement house movement for direction on the profession's next steps with the natural world. The final work is a presentation that joins Indigenous wisdom with Western approaches. The product proposes a theoretical and practice model that encourages humanity to return to *the beginning*, a place of mutual respect, resonance, and healthy relationship among and between all of Earth's inhabitants.

Discussion

Social work has been defending its viability as a profession since Flexner's presentation at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (1915). There is no question what social work is – a relational holistically trained systems profession gifted with the ability to weave information from other disciplines to address disparities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social work needs to claim its role as a relational profession that has incorporated information from all ways of knowing. It is time to make more than ripples through an anthropocentric approach. The profession must move beyond contemplative words and take concrete actions by adopting a paradigm that equates human and natural rights, improving engagement with those we have borrowed from (Indigenous, biological, natural, and social sciences), claiming its identity, and helping mend relationships for and among *all* of life.

Implications for Education

This work furthers the scholarship of social work education by providing the theoretical reasoning and methods for incorporating the natural world into its curriculum. By accessing Indigenous teachings and RCT tenets, social work can move forward with a framework to assuage the impacts of climate change on the world's most vulnerable – human's and the environment.

Practice Possibilities

This research yielded a synthesized approach of Indigenous and Western knowledge to engage micro, mezzo, and macro level practitioners in healing human and environmental maladies. The research findings indicate that social work would be returning to its roots by truly utilizing a person *and* environment perspective that incorporates knowledge of the natural world into assessment, intervention, and treatment strategies.

Future Research

By formally integrating the natural world into social work's purview, the profession is provided with the means and opportunity to participate in interdisciplinary research examining the intersection of relational disconnection of humans from and on the natural world. At present, this author is working with the Minnesota Department of Health to assess mental health professionals' awareness of solastalgia (dis-ease by witnessing impacts of climate change to one's *home*; Albrecht, 2010) and its impact on human mental, emotional, and physical health. Solastalgia crosses the social and natural sciences. This research is an impetus for social work to be at the table with the natural sciences and move toward a joint solution to climate change impacts on humans and the environment.

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Redefining Relationships in Social Work: People *and* the Natural Environment

Leah Prussia

St. Catherine University - University of St. Thomas

UNAVAILABLE UNTIL JUNE 1, 2020

Early Social Work and the Natural Environment: A Relational-Cultural Approach

Leah Prussia

St. Catherine University - University of St. Thomas

UNAVAILABLE UNTIL JUNE 1, 2021

Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

Leah Prussia

Doctorate in Social Work Program

St. Catherine University/University of St. Thomas

Author Note

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Abstract

Environmental wellbeing depends upon health of individuals and the natural world. This poster presentation shares a conceptual framework combining Indigenous wisdom and Western knowledge to suggest how to heal self and the environment. It is hoped that personal recovery through relationship and connection comes full circle to contribute to planetary healing.

Keywords: Indigenous wisdom, natural environment, relational-cultural theory, somatic literacy

Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

Indigenous teachings have acknowledged the importance of interconnection and balance among the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of self and the natural environment for thousands of years (Johnston, 2004; Peacock & Wisuri, 2009). With the gradual growth of agrarian practices, domestication of animals, the industrial revolution, advancements in technology (Lenski, 1984), and birth of the worldwide web, many have forgotten their inherent relationship with all that lives. This includes the relationship of the body, mind, and spirit, relationship with one another, and our deep connection with Aki - Earth, Nibi - water, the four-leggeds, swimmers, crawlers, fliers, and rooted relatives (Prussia, 2017).

Chronic relational disconnection has negatively affected personal and planetary health. The present relationship between *most* humans and the natural environment is dysfunctional at best and represents the depth and breadth of disconnection needing repair and restoration in order to heal. This disconnection has been linked to mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, *and* environmental ailments (Alcock, White, Wheeler, Fleming, & Depledge, 2014; Killingsworth & Bao, 2015; Louv, 2008; Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010). Western science has recently started to acknowledge the fundamental reality that balance, both internally and externally, requires recognition of relationship (Miller, 1986) and that nature *is* nurturing and necessary for human health and wellness (Howard et al., 2017). Whereas Indigenous wisdom has always recognized that “we are nature” (Biggs, Lake, & Goldtooth, n.d., p. 3). Relational-Cultural Theory espouses ideas similar to Indigenous teachings - that humans need relationship, and relationships between individuals or systems can be either mutually beneficial or depleting (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 2001).

An individual's inherent ability to attune with natural bodily rhythms is vital for wellness. The development of somatic literacy teaches an individual to read the body's cues and honor its

innate wisdom (Levine, 2010). This presentation provides a brief historical overview of the separation between mind and body, between humans and the environment, and offers insights about the current state of each. Teachings and basic tenets from Indigenous wisdom (Johnston, 2004; Peacock & Wisuri, 2009), Relational-Cultural (Jordan, 2001) and Polyvagal (Porges, 1995) theories, and somatic literacy skills (Levine, 2010; Payne, Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015) that help psychological, physiological, and spiritual systems harmonize in healing are woven throughout the conceptual framework. The presenter also shares ways of collaborating with the natural environment in the treatment process with the belief that personal recovery through relationship will come full circle and contribute to necessary planetary healing.

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Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

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Original Connections

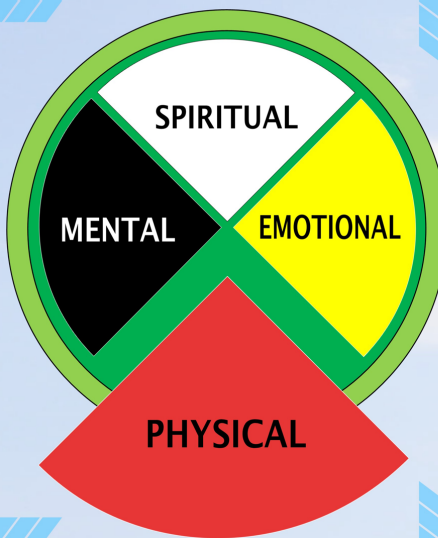
"We are all indigenous to somewhere."
-Andrew Favorite, White Earth Elder

Indigenous Wisdom

- Reverence for Earth (Aki)
- Relationship with All that Lives
- Mutual Respect
- Balance



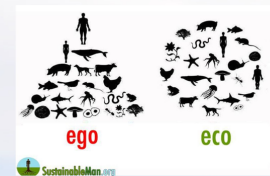
Medicine Wheel



Disconnection

Mind - Body

- Isolation
- Depression
- Addiction
- Diabetes
- Obesity



Humans - Natural World

- Polluted Waterways
- Decimation of Sacred Sites
- Mining and Oil Extraction
- Climate Change

Reconnection

"Relationship with nature is a formula for personal and planetary healing..."
-Leah Prussia

Somatic Literacy: A Tool for Reconnection

- Access Body's Natural Rhythms
- Broaden Awareness of Interoception
- Elevate Mind and Body Cohesion
- Collaborate with the Natural World



Call to Action: Move toward relationship with self, others, and all that lives...

Return to Relationships

"We need relationships like air and water."
-Dr. Judith Jordan

Relational - Cultural Theory: The 5 Good Things

1. Sense of Zest or Energy
2. Increased Sense of Worth
3. Clarity: Increased knowledge of oneself and the other person in the relationship
4. Productivity: Ability and motivation to take action both in the relationship and outside of it
5. Desire for more Connection: In response to satisfaction of relational experience

References and Acknowledgments

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