

Transforming the profession: Social workers' expanding response to the environmental crisis

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Powers, M. C. F. (2016). Transforming the profession: Social workers' expanding response to the environmental crisis. In A.-L. Matthies & K. Narhi (Eds.), *Ecosocial Transition of Societies: Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy*. Ashgate.

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in *Ecosocial Transition of Societies: Contribution of Social Work and Social Policy* on 04 October 2016, available online: <http://www.routledge.com/9781315615912>

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Abstract:

With mounting scientific evidence about the global environmental crisis, an urgent call to action exists promoting sustainable environmental practices that enhance the wellbeing of humans and the ecological systems in which they live (Besthorn 2002, 2013, Coates 2005, CSDH 2008, Dewane 2011, Dominelli 2012, Gray, Coates and Herrington 2013, Hoff and McNutt 1994, Humphreys and Rogge 2000, IPCC 2007, Weber 2012). As ecological degradation occurs, it disproportionately affects vulnerable, marginalized, and oppressed client populations, making it an issue of social and ecological injustice (Besthorn 2013, Bullard 1994, Coates 2003, Dominelli 2012, Hoff and Rogge 1996, Norton, Holguin and Manos 2013, McKinnon 2008, Weber 2012, Zapf 2009). Due to this, social and ecological justice issues related to the environmental crisis are increasingly becoming of great concern to social workers, as evidenced in national and international professional agendas (e.g., The Committee on Environmental Justice for the Council on Social Work Education in the United States of America (USA); the tenth Grand Challenge of the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, 'Create Social Responses to a Changing Environment', see Kemp and Palinkas 2015; the third agenda item in the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development: Commitments to Action, 'Working Toward Environmental Sustainability', see IASSW, ICSW, and IFSW 2012).

Keywords: social workers | environmental crisis | professional socialization

Article:

Introduction

With mounting scientific evidence about the global environmental crisis, an urgent call to action exists promoting sustainable environmental practices that enhance the wellbeing of humans and the ecological systems in which they live (Besthorn 2002, 2013, Coates 2005, CSDH 2008, Dewane 2011, Dominelli 2012, Gray, Coates and Herrington 2013, Hoff and McNutt 1994,

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Some social workers make a strong case for the profession to shift to an eco-centric paradigm and recognize its role and responsibility in response to the environmental crisis, while the social work profession as a whole has remained largely unresponsive to the global call to action; they argue it has been operating out of a human-centric paradigm and thus has narrowed the person-in-environment framework to be primarily focused on the social environment (Besthorn 2013, Besthorn and Meyer 2010, Coates 2005, Dominelli 2012, Gray, Coates and Herrington 2013, Hoff and McNutt 1994, Humphreys and Rogge 2000, Jones 2010, Mary 2008, Weick 1981, Zapf 2009). However, increasingly, individual social workers are responding despite the challenges they may encounter from any tensions around whether their work on environmental issues lies outside the professional identity (e.g., boundaries, norms, or responsibilities) of social work. These social workers' responses pose a challenge for the profession as they promote an expansion, or transformation, of the profession's identity as a whole. Currently, the social work literature includes few voices from this perspective (Dominelli 2012, Gray, Coates and Herrington 2013, LeBourveau and Ledlie-Johnson 2013), and does not explore professional socialization, including supports and/or tensions they have experienced, related to the development of professional identities that include a response to the environmental crisis. In this chapter I present a study that seeks to fill this gap in the literature by exploring: a) how these social workers developed a broader professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis, and b) how, if at all, these social workers influenced others in the profession to adopt a broader professional identity.

In the remainder of this chapter I briefly examine and critique models of professional socialization as applied to social work, ultimately applying a specific model offered by Reinharz (1993) as the conceptual framework for the current study. I concisely detail the methods for the current study. I also present the findings and results, including examples of roles these social workers fill in interdisciplinary settings, as well as the professional socialization factors that supported or challenged their development of a professional social work identity that included a response to the environmental crisis. I then organize the results in a model of reciprocal professional socialization. Finally, in the discussion I highlight how the results expand our understanding of professional social work identity, and ways the model of reciprocal professional socialization could be used with social work practitioners and students to engage them in responding to the environmental crisis.

Professional socialization of social workers: A review of the literature

Throughout their academic and professional careers, social workers are socialized to develop knowledge, skills, values, attitudes and a professional identity with certain norms and boundaries (e.g., professional social work roles, responsibilities, problem areas, practice approaches). Two predominant schools of thought have emerged concerning how professional socialization takes place - the structural functionalist perspective (Merton, Reader and Kendall 1957) and the symbolic interactionist perspective (Becker et al. 1961). A recent social work scholar, Miller (2010), offered a conceptual framework that extended these two major perspectives by combining aspects from both the structural functionalist and symbolic interactionist perspectives. Although Miller's model was well articulated and has been a significant contribution to the social work profession, the current study adds to her work by supplementing it with an additional model presented by Reinharz (1993) - the dynamic interactionist model of professional socialization. Reinharz's model is an alternative model in the symbolic interactionist perspective that also offers a substantial contribution to the way we can understand the professional socialization of social workers. Reinharz originally applied this model to her field of sociology, though it is written with all social sciences in mind. Below, I provide an in-depth exploration of Reinharz's model.

Although Miller's model has moved the profession of social work forward in the study of professional socialization, it can be further expanded by applying two key aspects explained in Reinharz's model. First, Miller's model did not incorporate the key aspect of personal agency as Reinharz's model did by making explicit the extent to which novices or students themselves become socializers. Miller's model allows for the setting itself to be a socializer, yet the individual novice him/herself is not indicated as a socializer. Second, Miller's model did not include the Reinharz model's attention to the problems novices have in conforming to a field that is full of inconsistencies, which is true of the social work profession. In the following paragraphs I explain in detail what Reinharz's dynamic interactionist model of professional socialization offers, in general, and to the field of social work, specifically.

According to Reinharz's (1993) model, professional socialization is a dynamic, continual process in which individual members interpret and apply what is taught to them, and determine whether they can accept and identify with it or question the assumptions and practices of the professional identity they are learning. She asserts that professional socialization begins before one's academic programme, and continues during one's academic programme and beyond into one's professional career as it involves an iterative process of formation, not merely an achievement of adopting a professional identity upon induction into a profession (e.g., graduation). Thus, this model fits well as a conceptual framework for the research question of how the participants in the current study developed a broader professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis. This research question is implicitly about the process of supports to help them develop their broader professional identity. However, Reinharz's model also prompted me to explicitly examine the tensions or hindrances to the study participants' process of developing a broader professional identity.

Reinharz explained that throughout their academic and professional careers, individuals experience internal struggles or conflict and question ambiguities in what is taught related to the

knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and professional identity they are developing. They may embrace, reject, synthesize, revise and/or modify norms and boundaries as they seek to resolve these internal conflicts and ambiguities. The conflict may not be the extreme of a 'crisis', rather it could be a simple ambiguity or anomaly one encounters in a professional setting. However, the conflict may be more significant as indeed, some professions have ambiguous norms and boundaries, or may even have competing models of practice; thus the individual must choose which model to incorporate into the formation of his or her professional identity. Reinharz thus challenged this notion of conformity as professions often have ambiguous norms and boundaries. This key component of Reinharz's model led me to explore the tensions (i.e., internal or external conflicts or ambiguities) that participants may have experienced in their response as a social worker to the environmental crisis.

Finally, Reinharz proposed a definition of professional socialization as a 'system of reciprocal impact' between the profession and the individuals being socialized (1993: 379). In this, Reinharz emphasized that the individuals themselves are to be considered socializers in addition to the typical socializers in the academic and professional settings (i.e., teachers, mentors, professional associations, peers). Reinharz claimed that individuals become additional socializers themselves when they assert personal agency as they interpret, question, and/or disagree with the knowledge, skills, values, attitudes, and professional identity of the profession into which they are being socialized. As they resolve their internal conflicts, they may feel they need to stretch, redraw, or push the norms and boundaries, thereby constructing a new, alternative professional identity, which in turn may eventually reshape the profession as a whole. According to Reinharz, it is in this reshaping of a profession by those who compose it that a profession can be transformed and enlivened. Thus, in the current study I also explored how participants have influenced others to accept a broader professional identity that includes a response to the environmental crisis.

In summary, Reinharz's dynamic interactionist model of professional socialization was an appropriate fit as a conceptual framework for this research study as it guided exploration of key components with the sample. Each key component was directly connected to Reinharz's dynamic interactionist model of professional socialization and was explored in further detail throughout the study.

Research methods and questions

I conducted an exploratory, qualitative research study using a constructivist, grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2006) which allowed for both deductive and inductive data collection and analyses. Upon approval by the Human Subjects Internal Review Board at the University of South Carolina and gaining informed consent from participants, I completed individual, semi-structured interviews with a purposive sample of social workers. Study participants were professionally trained social workers in the USA who had been in roles where they used their professional skills to address the environmental crisis (n=17). Each interview lasted approximately two and a half hours. Interviews were audio recorded and conducted using an interview guide composed of open-ended questions. Audio recorded interviews were transcribed by myself or by a professional transcriptionist, then I listened to each audio recording and checked each transcript for accuracy. Confidentiality was maintained and identifying information

was removed prior to dissemination. Final transcripts were put into Atlas®ti qualitative data analysis software for data management and analysis. Reinharz's (1993) theory of professional socialization was used deductively to frame data collection and analysis, primarily by using her framework to develop the interview guide. The data inductively guided my systematic process of coding, categorizing, and memo writing, especially as emerging concepts varied, or were absent from Reinharz's framework. I developed a codebook which included codes and their definitions and a process log was kept which included memos about observations and interpretations (Maxwell 2005). Coding allowed for the unpacking of the transcripts into smaller, discrete chunks, while memo writing allowed for the comparison of these chunks and to speculate about their meanings and relationships between them. I followed the coding and memo writing techniques described by Charmaz (2006) throughout the data analysis process. Finally, I compared and contrasted data from this sample of participants to the existing literature, specifically to Reinharz's (1993) model of professional socialization. I discuss this further in the following sections.

The current study was guided by the following research questions:

- a. How have these social workers developed a broader professional identity that includes a response to the environmental crisis?
- b. What, if anything, facilitated their response as a social worker to the environmental crisis?
- c. What, if anything, hindered their response as a social worker to the environmental crisis? How have they overcome these hindrances?
- d. How, if at all, have these social workers influenced others to accept a broader professional identity which includes a response to the environmental crisis?

Findings and results

Increasingly, social workers are professionally responding to the environmental crisis. For instance, the social workers in the current study were doing activities that contribute to the ecosocial transformation of society such as starting school recycling programmes as a school social worker, running community campaigns to respond to health hazards such as air pollution, and leading llama treks into the wilderness as therapy for at-risk youth. Often, these social workers used nature as a tool to benefit their clients, as they also worked to teach their clients how to care for the environment. The results from the in-depth interviews are presented in this chapter. First, I offer a brief description of the participants. I acknowledge that these descriptions are limited as they do not fully describe all of the unique and complex parts that constitute the whole of each participant.

Seventeen social workers participated in the current, exploratory research study. For confidentiality, each is referred to using a pseudonym, and other identifying information has been removed. Their ages ranged from 24 to 72 years, with the average age being 42. Five were in their late 20s, three in their mid to late 30s, three in their early 40s, four in their early 50s, one in their 60s, and one in their 70s. All but one participant held a Master of Social Work (MSW), and that participant held a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW); two participants also had attained doctoral level education in social work. Participants identified themselves as Bi-racial/Multi-

racial (n=1), Caucasian/Anglo-American (n=14), Latino/Hispanic (n=1), and Native-American/Alaskan Native/First Nations (n=1). There were 13 females and 4 males.

The 17 participants had experiences using their professional social work skills to work on environmental issues in various states across the USA, with 7 also having additional relevant work experiences overseas. The term 'work on environmental issues' denotes work with issues that address environmental outcomes. However, for the current study, these outcomes may be the result of an intentional intervention aimed to address environmental outcomes, or it may be the byproduct of an intervention that was meant to address social outcomes (e.g., wilderness therapy with social outcomes as intentional focus, and environmental outcomes as byproducts). Despite one's intent to exclusively address a social or an environmental outcome, each of these is going to have an inevitable impact on the other as humans and the environment are inextricably linked. The participants had a wide variety of social work practice experiences with environmental issues, for example: working with refugees on public and environmental health issues; doing case management and teaching group classes on healthy environments in the built environment (e.g., home environment); designing and producing products that make a social and environmental impact; leading wilderness therapy treks with llamas for at-risk youth; developing and implementing a school recycling programme or rain garden with at-risk youth; working with farmers' markets and nutrition programmes; developing programmes to address and prevent the root causes of childhood trauma related to nutrition and food security; working with the community to address environmental hazards; working with community gardening projects; conducting research studies on child hunger, nutrition, and food security; post-disaster case management; and, developing policies and programmes for mitigating environmental hazards and sustainable development.

As noted in the methods section above, I initially sought a sample that was diverse in the amount of time participants had been using their professional social work skills to work on environmental issues (e.g., 0-5 years, 6-10 years, beyond 10 years). This was due to my original supposition, based on Reinharz's (1993) model of professional socialization, that participants who had been working on environmental issues in their social work practice for longer periods of time would have developed more solidified professional identities that were broad enough to include a response to the environmental crisis. The participants varied on the amounts of time they had been using their professional social work skills to work on issues related to the physical environment from one month to 35 years, with the average being approximately 8 years. There were 8 participants who had less than 5 years of experience using their professional social work skills to work on issues related to the physical environment, 4 participants who had 6-10 years, and 5 participants who had more than 10 years.

After the first 5 interviews from participants on both ends of the spectrum of the amount of time they had been using their professional social work skills to work on environmental issues (e.g., 12 years, 1 year, 3 years, 35 years, 2 years, respectively), the data did not confirm my original assumption. Rather, the participants were more alike than different from each other, and the amount of years practising was not a key factor in the development of their professional identity formation to include a response to the environmental crisis. In order to further confirm this discovery, participants, primarily in the first two categories (e.g., 0-5 years, 6-10 years), were intentionally selected for interviews. These subsequent interviews confirmed that indeed, the

amount of time using their professional social work skills to work on environmental issues was not a key factor in shaping whether or not a participant developed a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis.

After I realized that the amount of time was not a key factor, I explored other factors that could potentially be important in shaping the participants' professional identities to include a response to the environmental crisis. During the process of data collection and analysis, several casual conversations with my colleagues occurred suggesting how they understood that environmental issues fit into macrolevel social work practice, but how they found it more difficult to see how working on environmental issues fit with micro-level social work practice. Thus, I believed it to be interesting and helpful to explore if level of social work practice was a factor in shaping the participants' professional identities to include a response to the environmental crisis. The participants in the current sample indicated they had done a wide range of activities at all levels of social work practice (e.g., micro, mezzo, macro, systems, see Miley, O'Melia and DuBois 2009) as they worked on environmental issues as professional social workers (e.g., direct practice as school social workers, direct practice therapists, community organizers, legislative policy advocates). Several participants explicitly acknowledged that social work is rarely practised at only one level of practice (e.g., only micro, only macro). There was no evidence in the data, however, that indicated that the level of social work practice was in any way a factor in shaping their professional identity to include a response to the environmental crisis.

After further data analysis, I discovered several key factors that shaped participants' professional identities to include a response to the environmental crisis, and their reciprocal process of shaping the profession. The participants who had been recruited for this study self-identified as social workers who used their professional skills to work on environmental issues. Thus, they were found to have two things in common. First, they all held professional identities as social workers and felt the profession was a good fit for them. Second, they all understood the professional boundaries of social work as being broad enough to situate themselves in roles that included work on environmental issues (e.g., refugee camp health and sustainability programming, parks and recreation gardening programmes, wilderness therapy). However, I discovered that these factors alone were not enough to support their development of a professional identity to include a response to the environmental crisis. Rather, these 17 participants seemed to parcel out into 3 groups along several other key factors, described below, that shaped their professional identities.

The first group included participants (n=7) who came to social work already maintaining an eco-centric perspective, thus, they naturally embraced an expanded understanding of the person-environment framework whether or not they had any external supports (e.g., personal experiences with nature, explicitly being taught about an expanded framework during social work education). They maintained passions for both social and environmental issues, seeing them as inextricably linked. These participants also understood it to be part of their professional responsibility to address environmental issues for the sake of the environment itself. For example, one participant, Alicia, stated,

I think it was just a natural progression from my own views on the environment. And, as I got farther into my field it just kind of came out in my practice. It just, I guess it just naturally evolved... and so it just, it made sense.

Another participant, Katherine, offered another similar example when she stated, 'I feel like including environment is not, or having the environment as an inclusion is not something new to me. It's always been my perception of social work.'

The most common internal tension this group described was feeling alone as a social worker working on environmental issues as they indicated they knew very few, if any, other social workers who held similar professional identities that included a response to the environmental crisis. The participants in this group had various external supports (e.g., paid employment to work on environmental issues), and also indicated that they had some external tensions (e.g., lack of social work education on environmental issues), but they ignored or overcame them and were ultimately able to develop a professional identity that included a response to environmental crisis.

The second group included participants (n=7) who recalled an 'epiphany moment', meaning a time when they consciously shifted to an eco-centric paradigm, leading to an understanding of the connection between social and environmental issues in an expanded person-environment framework, and accepted a professional responsibility for environmental issues. In addition, they indicated that they had earlier understood their passions and responsibilities for social issues as separate from their personal passions and responsibilities for environmental issues, but now saw them as connected. These epiphany moments were the result of various external supports (e.g., supportive people) and may have occurred during social work education or during an experience in social work practice, but they always occurred after they began their journey of becoming a professional social worker. For example, Amy stated:

Justice and social work ethics and my social work passions were always very separate from my kind of passion for nature and environment. And, I personally was never able to really join those for some reason until I took ____'s Ecology class. He kind of helped marry those things for me. So, it was kind of a duh moment, like wow.

Each participant in this second group experienced such an epiphany moment and indicated a conscious shift to an eco-centric perspective, which then allowed for an expanded person-environment framework and the understanding that addressing the environmental crisis was part of their professional responsibility. Similar to group one, the most common internal tension this group described was feeling alone as a social worker working on environmental issues. In addition, the participants in this group also had various external supports (e.g., paid employment to address environmental issues) and even indicated that they had some external tensions, but they ignored or overcame them (e.g., sought own education opportunities through independent study) and were ultimately able to develop a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis.

The participants in the third group (n=3) offered an unanticipated, but insight-building perspective as it was discovered that they in fact did not hold a professional identity that included

a response to the environmental crisis, despite their work as professional social workers in roles with environmental issues. This third group included participants who had, similar to groups one and two, seen the boundaries of social work as broad enough to position themselves in roles to work on environmental issues. But, differently from groups one and two, these participants experienced factors both externally (e.g., lack of social work education on environmental issues) and internally (e.g., holding a human-centric paradigm) that created tensions, which ultimately for the participants in this group seem to have prevented them from developing a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis. For instance, internal tensions included holding a human-centric perspective, not accepting an expanded person-environment framework, and not considering it a professional responsibility to address environmental issues. In addition, they understood their passions for social issues as professional and their passions, or perhaps milder interests, for the environment as personal, and never connected the two passions. One of these participants, for example, noted that when she saw the recruitment for this research study it was the first time that it occurred to her that work on environmental issues was something social workers did professionally. Liz had only recently begun a programme to address her clients' social issues that incorporated an environmental intervention (e.g., rain garden on a school campus). Liz was personally passionate and knowledgeable about environmental issues, but professionally she indicated that she had simply taken advantage of a community partnership opportunity to develop the intervention for primarily social outcomes. During our interview process it seemed that Liz was on the verge of an epiphany moment, even making comments, such as:

I realize, you asked me to define social work, but I'm defining it more as to people. I mean, I'm not broadening out enough, to include the environment. I see the application of using environment, you know, so I'm gonna do it with my [clients]. But I, generally speaking, don't have a broad definition that includes, that naturally includes it. So that's something that I'm gonna think more about. And redefine for myself.

For purposes of this data analysis Liz remained in group three as she consciously stated during the interview that she had not had a shift in thinking yet. But her participation was an incredibly insightful perspective to gain as part of this exploratory study, and I discuss it further in other sections of this chapter.

Similar to groups one and two, participants in group three knew very few, if any, other social workers who worked on environmental issues, though unlike those in groups one and two, participants in group three did not describe it as feeling alone as a social worker working on environmental issues, perhaps as they were not looking for solidarity in that part of their professional identity. In addition, the participants in group three had various external supports (e.g., paid employment to work on environmental issues, supportive people, education that prepared them to work on environmental issues as a social worker) that were similar to those in groups one and two. I discuss all of these key factors in greater detail in the following sections.

Ultimately, groups one and two could be combined into one group as social workers who *had* developed a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis. However, since they did have different processes of professional socialization and coming to an eco-centric perspective at various points in their journey they will be discussed as separate groups. This

combined group (i.e., group one and group two) differed from those in the third group, who *had not* developed a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis. The factors that emerged in these data are too numerous to explore in detail in this chapter, but can be found in additional resources (Powers forthcoming). However, I organize the key factors that emerged using the model presented by Reinharz (1993) and I describe them in the following Discussion section.

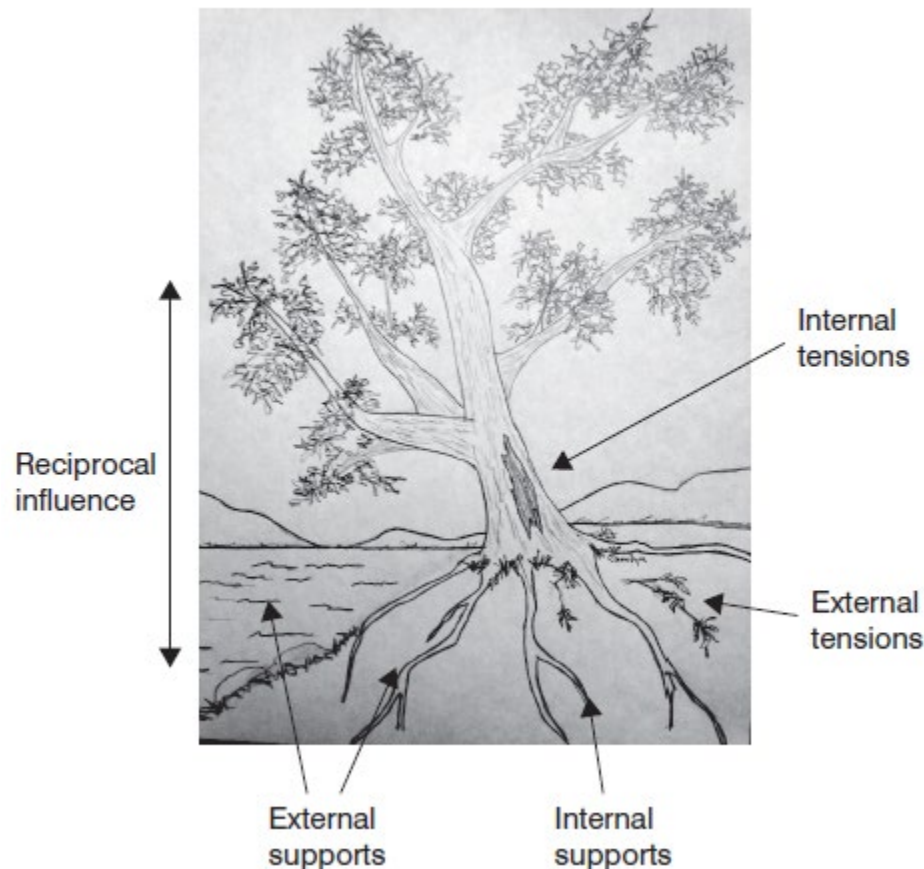


Figure 1. Model of reciprocal professional socialization of social workers for professional identity development that includes a response to the environmental crisis

Discussion

In the current study I applied and modified Reinharz's (1993) model of the reciprocal process of professional socialization to explore how social workers developed a professional identity which included a response to the environmental crisis. On one side the model takes into account factors that either supported or created tensions as the participants developed their professional identities. For example, participants not only experienced external tension factors (e.g., social work education that presented a narrow person-environment framework) suggesting what their professional identities ought to be, but also brought their own internal support factors (e.g., eco-centric paradigm) which created a lens through which they accepted, rejected, or modified the information suggested by the external factors.

On the other side of this reciprocal process of professional socialization, the participants were not only shaped by, but they also shaped the profession as they influenced others to accept such a broader professional identity. Ultimately, through this reciprocal process of professional socialization the participants in groups one and two developed a professional identity that included a response to the environmental crisis, while those in group three did not.

The key factors which emerged in the data were organized into five categories: 1) Internal Supports, 2) Internal Tensions, 3) External Supports, 4) External Tensions, and 5) Shaping the Profession. I briefly explain each category below. In addition, I added to Reinharz's model a metaphor of a social worker being like a tree (see Figure 1.) which I more fully explain below.

Explanation of model

- 1 Internal supports: The internal supports of participants' professional socialization are similar to that of a tree having an internal root system that supports its healthy development and growth. The factors that emerged in the data that fit this category are holding an eco-centric paradigm, holding an expanded understanding of the person-environment framework that included the physical environment, motivations (e.g., passion, religious/non-religious spiritual perspectives), and holding a belief that one is professionally responsible to address environmental issues as well as social issues.
- 2 Internal tensions: The internal tensions of participants' professional socialization are similar to the internal tensions a tree may have such as rotting on the inside due to disease or injury, challenging its healthy development and growth. The factors that emerged in the data that fit this category are holding a human-centric paradigm, holding a narrow understanding of the person-environment framework that does not include the physical environment, not seeing personal passions for environment as connected to professional passions for social issues, not holding a belief that they are professionally responsible to address environmental issues, and feeling alone as a social worker responding to environmental issues.
- 3 External supports: The external supports of participants' professional socialization are similar to the supportive, external environment of a tree such as receiving enough sunlight, soil, and water for healthy development and growth. The factors that emerged in the data that fit this category are experiences that triggered their response to the environmental crisis (e.g., positive experiences in nature such as camping as a child, negative experiences with nature such as a natural disaster), education for knowledge and skill development (e.g., social work education on environmental issues), paid employment (e.g., job allowed to integrate role within a job, creation of own job), and supportive people (e.g., other social workers, social work professors).
- 4 External tensions: The external tensions of participants' professional socialization are similar to the external tensions a tree may encounter such as lack of sunshine, water, or fertile soil, or a limb being cut off in a manner that challenges the tree's healthy development and growth. The factors that emerged in the data that fit this category are lack of education (e.g., no explicit education on environmental connections to social justice), no paid employment and/or lack of time (e.g., having to work on environmental issues after paid work hours), and

receiving non-supportive or negative messages (e.g., the environment not being something a social worker needs to address).

5 Shaping the profession: Finally, the other side of this reciprocal model of professional socialization process for these social workers includes the ways they influenced others and/or the profession. This is similar to the ways a tree may produce the seeds that then take root and yield new trees, or how its branches provide shade for other, smaller saplings, or when the tree drops its leaves and then becomes food to feed soil which gives itself and other trees a nutrient-rich environment in which to further develop and grow. The factors that emerged in the data that fall into this category are seeking study independent of the formal education system, field internships, and class assignments focused on environmental issues, teaching or lecturing, writing and publishing, informal discussions with others, and simply by their identifying themselves as a social worker and being involved in practice with environmental issues.

Limitations

There are limits to transferability to populations beyond the current study sample; however, the findings have contributed to a model of professional socialization that could be applied more broadly in social work research, education, and practice. In addition, it is possible that study participants were more alike than those who would not volunteer for such a study; however, this was an anticipated possibility as the target population was indeed a more homogeneous subset of the larger, general population of professional social workers. Finally, it is possible that non-English speakers and/or social workers from different cultural contexts and professional training could offer very different perspectives. Future studies could select broader samples which would add greater depth of findings that interviews within this sample may not have captured.

Conclusions

The model of professional socialization I have presented above highlights key factors that expand our understanding of the professional identity of social workers who use their professional social work skills to work on environmental issues. Despite all participants in the current study's sample identifying strongly as social workers, and being situated in roles to work with environmental issues, those factors alone were not enough to support their development of a professional identity to include a response to the environmental crisis. However, several other key factors were found to shape participants' professional identities and were presented in a model of reciprocal professional socialization. Entities and educators who aim to influence and shape social workers could intervene with any of the key factors presented in the above model, thereby potentially supporting the development of a professional identity that includes a response to the environmental crisis.

Examples include providing literature (e.g., NASW policy statement on the environment in Humphreys and Rogge 2000) for students or social work practitioners and explicitly discussing an eco-centric paradigm in classes or at professional social work conferences which lead to social work's professional obligation to address environmental issues alongside social issues. Having these explicit discussions would provide a source of external support that individuals

could consider and potentially embrace internally as they develop a professional identity that includes a response to the environmental crisis. In addition, education of social workers should include appropriate practice methods for intervening with clients and communities to achieve positive results for both social and ecological outcomes, as well as promoting social work research on environmental issues.

Another example is that social workers in this sample experienced feelings of being alone as a social worker, not knowing others who also had an ecocentric framework and who understood the connection of social justice with ecological justice. Thus, providing networking opportunities (e.g., the Green/Environmental Social Work Collaborative Network) could build solidarity among social workers worldwide as they realize they are not alone in their response to the environmental crisis.

A final example includes helping social workers to situate themselves in paid employment that allows them to fulfill their professional responsibility to address the environmental crisis. The social workers in this study found creative ways to situate themselves in such roles, either by integrating environmental issues into their current roles, seeking roles beyond traditional social work settings (e.g., Parks and Recreation departments), or establishing their own organizations.

The urgent conditions of the environmental crisis make it essential for the social work profession to become a leader in the ecosocial transformation of society. Although the profession as a whole has not embraced a broader professional identity, individual social workers are embracing an eco-centric paradigm with an expanded person-environment framework and incorporating the responsibility to address the environmental crisis as a professional responsibility. Thus, while these social workers are continuing to be shaped by the profession, at the same time, through their expanding response to the environmental crisis, these social workers are also transforming the profession.

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