Social Work and the Environment

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how social work students, faculty, and staff, understand environmental justice and their perceived level of environmental engagement in their respective programs.

It is an exploratory study that employed purposive, convenience sampling to select individuals with different roles within their social work programs.

The basic research question guiding this study is, “How do participants perceive their environmental education or engagement within their social work program?”

Methods

- Participants were recruited from two schools, the University of Southern Maine (USM) and the University of New England (UNE).
- The recruitment process was different between the two schools.
  - The researcher is a student at USM, and used her own role as a USM graduate student to reach out to prospective participants.
  - For UNE recruitment, the researcher relied on word of mouth and informants.
- Interviews were transcribed and then coded for emergent themes.
  - All data was manually coded by the researcher.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions

- What is your role at USM/UNE?
- What drew you to the social work field?
- What do you see as the top three things social workers seek to address?
- Do you know about the NASW’s stance on environmental justice?

For student participants

- In what ways does your social work education ask you to think about or engage with the environment?
- What are some ways your social work education could further incorporate the ethics of environmental justice into the curriculum?

For faculty participants

- In what ways does your teaching ask your students to think about or engage with the environment?
- What are some ways your class content could further incorporate the ethics of environmental justice?

For staff participants

- In what ways do your role ask social work students to think about or engage with environment?
- What are some ways you can further incorporate the ethics of environmental justice in your work with students?

Results

Participants perceived their environmental education or engagement within their social work program as being central, somewhat present, or not at all, with a number of important factors influencing their responses.

Some of these factors include personal commitments to environmental issues, clinical versus community track, or the student’s undergraduate experience. Preliminary findings using Thematic Analysis suggest several main themes in the interviews. Two of these themes include consternation and interest.

- Consternation: The majority of participants hesitated, expressed confusion or even some anxiety, when responding to the question, “Do you know about the NASW’s stance on environmental justice?” Many expressed awareness of some environmental stance but did not name any specifics.
- Interest: In contrast, the majority of participants also expressed interest in learning more about the ways in which social workers can connect environmental issues with their practice.

Next Steps

The findings in this research project have many things in common with published studies looking at social worker’s understanding of environmental issues.

For example, Miller & Hayward (2014) found in their research that the majority of students said environmental issues are important (72%) and sixty-three percent reported that environmental issues should be included in social work curriculum yet only eight percent said there was “enough” content related to environmental issues in the social work curriculum (p. 287).

Significantly, almost every participate demonstrated interest in understanding more deeply how social worker’s can address environmental issues in their practice. While this can suggest further research, a practical application would be to suggest a program evaluation specifically looking at environmental competency for professor’s within their respective Schools of Social Work.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Professor Shanti, who supported the initial idea and challenged me to ask better questions. Thank you, also, to the students, faculty, and staff who agreed to participate in this research project.

References
