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Stephanie Rendall
University of Southern Maine

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Social Work and the Environment

Stephanie Rendall, School of Social Work, University of Southern Maine

Caroline Shanti PhD, LCSW, School of Social Work, University of Southern Maine

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?”

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 does 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?

Methods

- ✧ Participants were recruited from two schools, the University of Southern Maine (USM) and the University of New England (UNE)
- ✧ The recruitment process was differed 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



Figure 1. Hoey, D. (2014, March 30). National Weather Service issues flood watch for western and coastal Maine - Portland Press Herald. Retrieved from http://www.pressherald.com/2014/03/30/rain_and_wind_toppling_trees_in_maine_sunday/

An excerpt from one participant’s response to the question: Do you know about the NASW’s stance on environmental justice?

“I know about it [laughs] and that’s about it. I know it’s there. Do you want to ask another question, or do you want me to expand on that?”

Yeah, I don’t know enough about it, or as much as I want to know about it. Um, and I don’t think we’re really taught about it [laughs]. Um, but, I know it’s there, and it’s kind of something that we check off, and you know, match and do, in our field placements and things. But we, I don’t personally do, and don’t know how to do.”

Figure 2. Excerpt from interview transcript

In 1999, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Delegate Assembly proclaimed that **“environmental exploitation violates the principle of social justice and is a direct violation of the NASW Code of Ethics.”** Consequently, a new social work policy statement was issued on the environment.

In 2010, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) declared that sustainability is the social justice issue of the new century, with the theme of the 56th CSWE annual program meeting being “Promoting Sustainability in Social Work.” The global issue of sustainability has finally garnered the attention of social work, a profession preeminent in the field of social justice (Dewane, 2011, p. 20)

Figure 3. Excerpt from Social Work Today

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.

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