Establishing Environmental Social Work: Investigating the Pragmatic Application of an Under-Developed Subfield in New South Wales

by

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This thesis is dedicated to my grandparents,
Nonno Vittorio, Nonna Rosa, Papou Christos, and Yiayia Katina

Your sacrifices have provided my opportunities.
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Statement of Authentication

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

Chris V. Panagiotaros
September 24, 2018
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<td>AASW</td>
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<td>CPD</td>
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<td>EfS</td>
<td>Education for Sustainability</td>
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<td>ICS</td>
<td>International Committee on Stratigraphy</td>
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<td>LGNSW</td>
<td>Local Government New South Wales</td>
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<td>NSW</td>
<td>New South Wales</td>
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<td>WGA</td>
<td>The Working Group on the Anthropocene</td>
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Abstract

Climate change is already having a major impact on the global ecosystem, and the consequences are predicted to become increasingly severe in coming decades. These consequences are not just environmental but socio-environmental. Social work as a profession has both an opportunity and a duty to respond to this contemporary crisis. Current social work literature acknowledges this responsibility. Despite this, the specific subfield of environmental social work remains heavily under-explored in terms of both theorisation and its pragmatic application. This project addresses this gap, which is both academic and professional. Thus, the present research audited the current pragmatic application of environmental social work in New South Wales (NSW) utilising a concurrent web-based survey. It aimed to identify the number of environmental social workers practising in NSW between April and August of 2018. Only four social workers meet the criteria for inclusion in this study. This demonstrates there is a discrepancy between the current social work literature and what is occurring in the field. Consequently, the research was altered to investigate why there were so few environmental social workers in the field. The amendment included semi-structured, in-depth interviews with three environmental social work practitioners. Critically, the research found there were social workers practicing but not identifying with the term, and there were barriers inhibiting practice. Additionally, the research highlighted the need for a professional paradigm shift constituting a change in values, education, and research. This entails a change from the human-centric and modernist paradigm to one that recognises the connection between humans and nature and acts in accordance with promoting biodiversity. The research suggests that this paradigm shift has to be entrenched in the practical application of environmental social work. Moreover, the research provides important evidence to progress this paradigm shift and strengthen future research and practice within the subfield.
Chapter 1:
Introduction

The subfield of environmental social work first appeared in academia in 1987 when Soine (cited in Coates & Grey 2011) called for the expansion of the profession to include the environment, arguing that it is no longer possible to ignore the interaction between the individual and the environment. Soine (1987) expounded on this idea by exploring how the physical environment, namely environmental hazards, impacts on health and wellbeing. Similar research had been occurring prior to Soine’s (1987) publication, though they did not directly mention social work’s role. For example, two years prior, Shkilynk (1985) reported on mercury poisoning among First Nation communities in Canada. Since the late 1980’s, there has been an increased prevalence of environmental social work articles and an emerging body of literature (Guthnell 1992; Berger 1995; Rogge & Darkwa 1996; Ife 1997; Coates, Gray & Hetherington 2006; Dominelli 2018). However, despite the increasing relevance of environmental social work as the impacts of anthropogenic climate change continues to play out, the subfield itself remains surprisingly underdeveloped, lacking specific theoretical frameworks.

There is an extremely scarce exploration in terms of what might be called the ‘pragmatic application’ of environmental social work, which could be defined as ‘what does environmental social work practice look like in the field?’. This problem of practical application was pointed out by Molyneux in 2010. Molyneux’s (2010, p. 67) review of the environmental social work literature found there was ‘rhetorical commitment’ to environmental social work rather than suggestions or frameworks for practice. Despite Molyneux (2010) calling for researchers to urgently explore these practical realities, investigations remain rare (Hetherington and Boddy 2013; Miller & Hayward 2014; Ramsay & Boddy 2016). Molyneux (2010) points out that the literature has predominately focused on critiquing existing structures or the professions current positioning. While important, an investigation into the practical realities of the subfield is essential to advance research and practice.
To address this gap, the research project initially aimed to map the current environmental social work practices existing in New South Wales (NSW), Australia. The mapping process began with the intention to create a holistic image of the current environmental social work landscape. However, when the survey finished distribution, it became evident that there were too few social workers practising or identifying with the term ‘environmental social work’ to create a cohesive and relevant map. Consequently, the research was altered to investigate why there were so few environmental social workers in the field. This understanding of practise provides a foundation from which the profession can advocate for and enhance the role of environmental social work.
Chapter 2: 
Literature Review

The literature uses a variety of terms to describe the subfield, these include eco-spiritual social work, eco-social work, environmental social work, green social work, and sustainable social work (Ramsay & Boddy 2016). There are nuances in meaning for each term and authors have debated about which term is most appropriate and encompassing (see Jones 2018). This research will utilise the term ‘environmental social work’ because this is the most prevalent and established term in the literature (Ramsay & Boddy 2016). For the purposes of the research, an environmental social worker will be defined as a practitioner whose ‘central focuses assist communities to create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem’ (Ramsay and Boddy 2017, p. 82). This research will employ an inductive approach, ‘conceived as “bottom-up,” data-driven, and/or exploratory’ (Woo, Boyle & Spector 2017, p. 255). Thus, the research will conceptualise and understand environmental social work through what is observed and its pragmatic application. Environmental social work research has largely dealt with the theoretic nature of the subfield. The succeeding literature review grapples with the theoretical and conceptual nature of environmental social work but places a larger emphasis on the praxis.

2.1 Moving beyond the ‘person-in-environment’ framework

The earliest pioneers in the field of social work emphasised the importance of ‘environment’ in theoretical frameworks and practice (Addams 1910; Richmond 1922). However, the definition and use of the term ‘environment’ was primarily viewed through a social science lens, disregarding environment as ecology. One of the pioneers of social work, Jane Addams (1910) argued that practice should focus not on biological characteristics but instead social circumstances. That is to say, people should be understood within the contexts of their own social environments. Looking beyond the individual and contextualising the social environment within social work practice has differentiated the profession from psychiatry, psychology, and counselling (Ritchie 2010). These foundations have meant social work has developed the practice-defining framework of ‘person-in-environment’.
The ‘person-in-environment’ framework guides social work practices to understand individual behaviour in relation to the environmental context in which the person lives and acts (Gibelman 1999; Weiss-Gal 2008). The ‘environment’ in the framework is defined as proximal and interpersonal environments such as home, family and school (Kemp 2011). The ‘person-in-environment’ framework, importantly, moves beyond understanding individuals in isolation and ensures social workers are looking at intergroup relations and structural impacts. However, the restricted definition of ‘environment’ as social networks and relationships means that mainstream social work literature has ignored ecological issues and their complex impact on human health and well-being (Zapf 2010; Alston 2013; Jones 2013). Only viewing environment through a social lens has limited the professions ability to engage with pressing environmental concerns (Zapf 2010; Dominelli 2018). Furthermore, it suggests a dichotomy between person and environment. The profession has largely negated the holistic and interdependent relationship between humans and ecology (Gray & Coates 2011). The person-in-environment framework fails to acknowledge the co-dependency relationship between humans and environment at every level ranging ‘[f]rom large-scale weather events, through to the food we eat daily, right down to the minute organisms colonising our skin and digestive systems…’ (Shannon, 2014, para. 8)

2.2 Indigenous ways of knowing and the non-human world

Another prevalent theme arising in the environmental social work literature is the importance of Indigenous lenses and ways of knowing. A notable concept analysis of environmental social work conducted by Ramsay and Boddy (2016) showed that 41% of articles reported on learning from Indigenous cultures. This is a common and necessary framework for environmental movements and is particularly pertinent in Australian given the sophisticated and interconnected relationship of Aboriginal land management. For example, David Holgram (2016), the co-founder of the permaculture movement states that the ideas of Aboriginal active management, farming and use of the land led to the formation of permaculture as a design system.
Pascoe (2014, p. 156) argues in the closing remarks of his important book *Dark Emu: Black Seeds: Agriculture or Accident?* – ‘Aboriginals were intervening in the productivity of the country and what they learnt during that process over many thousands of years will be useful to us today’. Accordingly, environmental social work practitioners and researchers need to be listening to and learning from the First Nations Peoples. This is ‘familiar ground for social work’ as the profession has a strong Indigenous body of literature and educational program, but this needs to extend to the ecological crisis and the non-human world (Ife 2018, personal communication, 9 August).

A subsect of the environment social work literature argues for the inclusion of the non-human world. This challenges a fundamental pillar of social work: human rights. This idea presents both challenges and opportunities (Ife 2016). Ife (2016 p. 7) lays out the need for the social work profession to move beyond preconceived notions of human rights, and to ‘…extend them [rights] to the non-human world’ and as First Nations People have done for so long ‘…recognize and celebrate our natural interconnection’ with the Mother Earth.

Similarly, theorists such as Thomas Ryan (cited in Walker, Aimers & Perry 2015, p. 25) argue that ‘social work has been blinkered’ by its anthropogenic focus, particularly by the absence of animals in theorisation and practical application. Ryan (2013, p.158) calls for ‘a widening of social work’s moral scope’ to include the non-human world. Ryan (2015) states that there ought to be an inherent respect for animals – in and of themselves – but it is also significant to recognise the place of animal-assisted therapy for people with disabilities, trauma, grief, loneliness, and victims of domestic violence.

Environmental social work reveals a nexus between the scientific paradigm and Indigenous ways of knowing. However, this is not to say these ways of thinking are inherently paradoxical. Pascoe (2014) demonstrates how this nexus has historical roots through his investigation into Indigenous communities prior to colonisation, which revealed Indigenous peoples conducted experiments and tested hypothesis. Environmental social work as a subfield ought to pay attention to the scientific method and discoveries, for example climate change science and solar panel
technology. Correspondingly, it is essential to draw upon Indigenous methods and expertise on cultivation, agriculture, aquaculture, farming, and fire management. Environmental social work is therefore emerging as a unique subfield of social work that amalgamates evidence-based practice with Indigenous ways of knowing.

Eco-spirituality is another customary term in the environmental social work literature. The eco-spiritual worldview embodies ‘care and consideration for the well-being’ of life on earth and earth as a whole (Coates, Gray & Hetherington 2006, p. 395). Accordingly, eco-spiritual social work challenges the ‘person-in-environment’ framework by recognising the connection between person and nature (Ferreira 2010) and is thus trying to seek a more inclusive model. Coates, Gray and Hetherington (2006, p. 389) argue these values are more 'consistent with Indigenous knowledge systems'.

2.3 Ecology and well being

Since the 1990’s there has been a growing realisation that the social work profession is failing to address environmental concerns, resulting in a small but growing field of literature. Environmental social work scholars such as Ramsay and Boddy (2016, p. 69) are urging the profession to move beyond the ‘individualistic, anthropocentric, clinical, materialistic, modernist paradigm’ it is currently positioned within.

An emerging theme from environmental social work literature discusses the relationship between ecology and well-being. That is, the recognition that humans are not immune from environmental changes and that human wellbeing is closely linked to the ‘proper’ functioning of ecosystems. For example, a study conducted by Berry, Bowen and Kjellstrom (2009) found a causal pathway between severe adverse weather events and poor mental and physical health. Additionally, Burke et al. (2018, p. 1), ‘using comprehensive data from multiple decades’, found that higher temperatures increase suicide rates. With unmitigated climate change, the authors predict a ‘combined 9-40 thousand additional suicides’ (Burke et al. 2018, p. 1). Albeit, it is essential to note that such research cannot prove a causal link, but there is sufficient evidence for concern, particularly as the evidence is consistent with research in both Australia and India (see Kunde et al. 2017; Carleton 2017).
Social workers are one of the five core professional groups in the mental health field (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW] n.d), these findings represent the intersectionality between social work and ecology.

Data analysing the relationships between human health, and nature and biodiversity is still in its infancy, and ‘more research examining the linkages is absolutely critical’ (Sutton-Grier & Ward 2015, p. 12). However, a literature review by Sandifer, Sutton-Grier and Ward (2015) showed a clear relationship between human health and ecology; including cognitively, psychologically, physiologically, socially, and spiritually. These linkages show a clear nexus between social work and broader ecological discourses as the social work profession aims to promote ‘social change… and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance wellbeing’ (AASW 2010). This notion is embodied in the new and promising field of eco-therapy. Eco-therapy encompasses a wide range of treatment programs that seek to improve mental and physical health by ‘creating a deeper connection to nature’ (McGeeney & Royan 2016, p. 24). Eco-therapy fosters multidisciplinary collaborations that can enhance health and conservation; bringing together social, environmental health and biomedical scientists, along with land planners and policymakers (Sandifer, Sutton-Grier & Ward 2015).

Social workers are trained to skilfully coordinate multi-disciplinary teams, provide social support networks, develop plans with individuals and communities and assist in crisis intervention, recovery, advocacy and health management (Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012). These skills are invaluable to combat the pressing ramifications of climate change, which is set to increase natural disasters, poverty, displacement, violence and negatively impact mental health and wellbeing (Hughes & McMichael 2011).

### 2.4 Inequality and the neoliberal critique

The Working Group on the Anthropocene (WGA), with arrival into the new millennium, declared that the planet has entered a new geological time period, known as the Anthropocene, translating to the ‘age of humans’ (Trischler 2016). However, the formal review into the new epoch is still being analysed by the
International Committee on Stratigraphy (ICS) who are the governing body making decisions about geologic time and scale (Jamieson 2017). The Anthropocene would signify a permanent transformation of geological strata that is the result of human activity (Heise 2017). Heise (2017) explains that such changes are difficult to reverse, particularly by individuals and small communities. As Klein (2014) puts forth, addressing climate change means addressing the prevailing economic system.

The social work profession has been a vocal critique of the neoliberal market-orientated paradigm (Spolander et al. 2014). Ramsay and Boddy’s (2016) concept analysis found that 85% of articles based on environmental social work emphasised the importance of understanding and critiquing the neoliberal paradigm. Neoliberalism is the extension of the ‘free’ market to every part of our public and personal worlds (Birch 2017). This crossover between sociology and economics is why Davies (2016, para. 4) believes ‘neoliberalism [is] often entangled in this sort of flawed philosophy of language’. Thus, making it imperative – when critiquing such a dominant and ambiguous framework – to be specific. As Holden and Dixon (2018) point out, critiques of neoliberalism often leave little guidance as to what should be kept or replaced. The neoliberalism that will be critiqued in the subsequent paragraph is the economic system that serves corporations rather than people, threatens to undermine the quality or values-based dimension to public provision, and prioritises economic values at the expense of social inequalities and environmental degradation (Holden & Dixon 2018).

Social work and broader ecological discourses are inevitably at odds with this form of neoliberalism. As Coates (2005 p. 28) states ‘the root cause of the environmental crisis is situated in the values and beliefs… that inform economics and technology…’. Social work practice has largely dealt with the repercussions of structural disadvantage produced by persistent economic growth and production, without adequately challenging the underpinning beliefs and systems (Banks 2012). Accordingly, it is important for social workers to challenge the dominant frameworks and advocate for ecological justice at a systematic level (Coates 2005; Dominelli 2012), rather than only focusing on the direct implications of climate change. If the profession only adjusts to the repercussions of climate change, it continues on the
course of becoming ‘co-dependent’ with the neoliberal agenda and ‘modern society on the road to ecological disaster’ (Coates 2015, p. 36).

Although figures are contested (see McAdam & Blocher 2016), the ramifications of climate change could mean large numbers of people will become displaced due to rising sea levels and increased natural disasters. Other direct implications include increased drought, pollution and difficulty in accessing fresh water and food (Patz et al. 2005). All of which directly impact on human health and well-being. These consequences disproportionally affect marginalised people (Abramovitz et al. 2001) – those who have the least to do with greenhouse gas emissions will suffer its most brutal effects. In a study conducted by Althor, Watson and Fuller (2016), the authors found 20 of the 36 highest emitting countries were the most protected from the negative effects of climate change. Conversely, 11 of the 17 countries with low or moderate emission were most vulnerable to the negative implications of climate change, demonstrating the vast and disproportionate global inequality (Althor, Watson & Fuller 2016).

A primary focus of social work is to address and redress inequality and injustices affecting marginalised people (AASW 2010). The countries most affected are those who suffer from greater poverty and negative health outcomes (Hallegatte et al. 2016), hence why authors such as Besthorn and Meyer (2010) argue the displacement of persons and implications of climate change on marginalised people must become the central focus of attention for the social work profession. These detrimental effects of climate change demonstrate the connection between the global and the local, particularly how economic globalisation is affecting communities and individuals.

2.5 Social work education

The deontological imperatives indicate the overlapping narrative of social work and environmentalism. Despite these pressing concerns and recent growth in the literature, socio-environmental issues remain on the periphery compared to the mainstream concerns of the profession (Gray, Coates & Hetherington 2012; Jones 2013). It is through the systematic process of education that social workers can gain
environmental knowledge and skills. Yet, Jones’ (2013) analysis of social work education in Australia found that, despite minor outliers, there was limited education about ecological frameworks. Similar results were found by Harris and Boddys (2017, p. 340) recent content analysis of Australian social work courses; only 0.43% of the 937 ‘subject titles included terms classified as related to the natural environment…’. Miller and Hayward (2014) confirm the direct consequences of such curriculums, finding that social workers have a level of ‘environmental literacy' no better than the average population.

The need for environmental social work education is reflected in a study by Nesmith and Smyth (2015) who found that 92% of accredited social workers were working with individuals who confront environmental hazards. Environmental hazards, as described by Nesmith and Smyth (2015, p. 489), included ‘the presence of toxins or pollutants, natural disasters, lack of access to healthy foods, and other situations or activities that create an unsafe natural environment’. Another finding from Nesmith and Smyth’s (2015) research was that practitioners had high levels of motivation to learn about environmental social work. The social workers wanted to be trained and competent when dealing with environmental issues. Furthermore, 73% of the respondents wanted future social workers to be trained and capable when working with environmental issues; hence the necessity of environmental social work training and education.

Not only is environmental social work education apt and practically necessary, students are also interested in becoming trained in this subspecialty. Miller and Hayward’s (cited in Hayward, Miller & Shaw 2013) study found that 88% of Mater of Social Work students ‘strongly agreed’ or ‘agreed’ that environmental issues were an important part of social work. Sixty-four per cent of these student thought environmental issues should be included in the social work curriculum (Miller & Hayward, cited in Hayward, Miller & Shaw 2013).

2.6 Shifting theory and research into practice

An underpinning social work paradigm is evidence-based practice. This means to use the current, best evidence to inform interventions for practice (Gray et al. 2012).
A mass quantitative analysis conducted by Cook et al. (2013) found that 97% of climate scientists agree climate change is occurring and it is anthropogenic. This makes it important for the social work profession to not only critique neoliberalism but remain critical, whilst engaging those who reject the science of climate change as it does not align with the social work professions evidence-based foundations. As environmental social work is an emerging subfield, it is important to remain rigorous and transparent in research and practice. This research into the prevalence and practical application of the subfield attempts to provide both evidence and clarity about how environmental social work is being practised in NSW. Without this, as put by Molyneux (2010, p. 67), environmental social work is unlikely to ‘reach the attention of policy-makers and enter mainstream social work’.

Ramsay and Boddy (2017) suggest four key attributes social workers are able to use when responding to socio-environmental challenges. These include the creative application of social work skills to address environmental issues, openness to different values and ways of practice, a change in orientation, and ability to work across boundaries and in multiple spaces. The literature lacks an analysis of the degree to which these attributes are being applied. The emerging body of literature has focused predominantly on the conceptual nature of environmental social work and there are ‘scant empirical investigations related to the intersection of environmental issues with social work education and real-world practice’ (Miller & Hayward 2014, p.282).

In Gray, Coates, and Hetherington’s (2012) edited book, there are six case studies of environmental social work practice. These include community gardening; working with drought-affected families; using animals in practice; an ecological health initiative with young adults and juveniles; and social workers as negotiators between communities and mining corporations. Similarly, Dominelli (2008) in her edited book The Routledge Handbook of Green Social Work dedicates a section to the practice of environmental social work – demonstrating that researchers are beginning to explore the pragmatic application. However, such practice examples are rare (Molyneux 2010; Hetherington and Boddy 2013; Miller & Hayward 2014; Ramsay & Boddy 2016), and there is little knowledge about the degree to which environmental social work is being applied and how. This is despite environmental social work
publications tripling twice in the last fifteen years which is indicative of an academic change, but this does not seem to be translating into practise (Ramsay & Boddy 2016). Many of these academic publications have been ‘highly theoretical and normative in nature’ (Molyneux, cited in Hetherington and Boddy 2013, p. 2). This research project directly addresses this weakness, attempting to bring greater clarity about what is happening on the ground. Thus, the research project focuses on the praxis and attempts to begin the process of shifting theory and research into practical application.

Coates and Gray (2011, p. 234) anecdotally propose ‘many social workers are practising on the margins’, meaning there are practitioners who are doing environmental social work but not necessarily identifying or writing about these involvements. Brown et al.’s (2015) research show many people practice social work, without having the accredited degrees; which is important to consider when investigating environmental social work. Social service agencies often have trouble recruiting and retaining qualified social workers due to the long hours, poor pay, stressful work, and complex caseloads (Morris 2005; Clark et al. 2008, cited in Brown et al. 2015). Consequently, many social service agencies end up hiring practitioners without a degree in social work (Brown et al. 2015). To thoroughly explore the subfield of environmental social work, it is important to pay attention to these issues of description and redescription, with the aim of mobilising social workers.

Ramsay and Boddy (2016) suggest there are two reasons for the ambiguity and confusion about the practice application: the lack of clarity about the term environmental social work, and additionally, the ‘different interpretations of environmental social work and [the] variety of different terms used’ (Ramsay & Boddy 2016, p. 2). Transparency, clarity, and knowledge translation ought to be a cornerstone of social work literature. Ramsay and Boddy (2016, p. 2) accentuate this point, stating that, ‘[i]n the absence of clarity, translation of environmental social concepts is unlikely’. This project attempts to address the lack of clarity at both general and specific levels. At a general level, the project continues to theorise the nature, concerns, and motivations of environmental social work. At a more specific
level, the project investigates how, where and to what degree environmental social work is being applied in NSW.
Chapter 3:
Theoretical Framework

The succeeding methodology will be expounded starting with the guiding theoretical frameworks (ontological and epistemological approaches) and narrowed down to research methods and data collection techniques. The methodology is guided by Roy Bhasker's (1975) theory of critical realism and Margaret Archer's (1995) morphogenetic approach. Critical realism and the morphogenetic approach are befitting in addressing the overarching aim of the research project. Additionally, these frameworks are pertinent as they carry the social work emancipatory objectives of social change (Graig & Bigby 2005; Oliver 2011).

3.1 Critical realism

Critical realism is a unique theoretical framework for the validation and power given to both the role of structure and agency within its core values (Collier 1994). Critical realism follows on from Durkheim’s (1925) research that reinforces the belief that while structure *precedes* agency it can be *transformative* under the influence of human agency. Therefore, Bhasker (1975) and Archer (1995) do not consider agents as passive or devoid of choice. Instead, the analytical duality between structures and agents means agents can ‘consciously or unconsciously shape those social structures’ (Fletcher 2017, p. 186).

There are significant discrepancies between the definition of the role of structure and agency across the literature and so it is imperative to separate and identify what each of these terms constitutes (Kaidesoja 2007). This research project represents structure as ‘ecology and the natural world’. While, agency symbolises social workers and represents the actions, interactions, and responses this group has with the ecology. These categorisations of structure and agency adhere to critical realist principles of structure pre-dating agency and thus laying the foundational patterns for interaction (Jessop 2005). This research project aims to analyse the interaction between structure and agency and the implications of the interaction. There is another application of critical realism that offers valuable guidance for the research,
that is, the structure as ‘organisations’ and agency as ‘social workers’. The application plays out through organisations laying down the foundations for action – meaning the organisation can either hinder or facilitate the social workers’ environmental practice. Another application pertinent to the research is the notion of global and local connections. The global refers to global neoliberalism and global corporations, whilst the local signifies communities and individuals. Conceptualising the ‘global’ as the structure and agency as the ‘local’ – the global system lays down the foundation for action, but the individuals and communities are able to influence the global structure. For example, there is a global structure that controls food processing and distribution which produces colossal greenhouse emissions and environmental harm (Vermeulen, Campbell & Ingram 2012), however the local (communities and individuals) are able to interact and influence this structure by localising food or altering consumer choices.

3.2 Morphogenetic approach

Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach builds on the critical realist framework by emphasising causality. Archer (1995) provides a unique approach to theory that combines structure, culture and agency. This collaboration signifies that people are embedded within structural and cultural circumstances and their actions proceed to modify or sustain this cycle (Archer 1995). Archer (1995) argues that existing structures compel and enable agents who in turn produce actions of consequence. The structure then adjusts or adapts to this change, resulting in a further reaction from agents which produces the cyclical relationship. This idea is what Archer (1995) refers to as the morphogenetic sequence:

*Figure 1: The Morphogenetic Sequence*
From this, the idea is to unpack interactions between structure and agency and isolate causation. Accordingly, the researcher is tasked with (a) first identifying the structural conditions, then (b) analysing the change interaction between structures and agents, and (c) pinpointing the outcome of the interaction (Edwards Jr. & Brehm 2015). The current project is embedded in the social work tradition that aims to create progressive social change and thus influence the future development of environmental social work. It will do this by understanding how structure influences action and how that relationship can inform structural elaboration.

Critical realism and the morphogenetic approach have been criticised for the difficulty of language and the lack of applicable and direct examples (Craig & Bigby 2005; Oliver 2012; Fletcher 2017). As social work has placed immense importance on the translation from theory to practice (see Sheppard 1998), it is important to ground these concepts with tangible examples and make knowledge accessible. The critical realist and morphogenetic approach will be illustrated through the case study of Malaria treatment. When malaria began to become rife in India, Ross (1897) undertook research to find the cause. After many failed attempts, Ross (1897) continued to narrow causation, which led him to find malaria in two species of mosquitos. Once causation was discovered, the researchers could then focus on treatment. One can conceive ‘structure’ as malaria and ‘agent’ as Ross. Once malaria (structure) was understood, the agent (Ross) could then influence the way it progresses. Consequently, a morphogenesis or a new structure occurs. This interaction is the process of structural elaboration. Relating this back to the research, by unpacking the pragmatic application of environmental social work, causation can be isolated. Meaning, once there is an understanding of environmental social work, the field can examine where it is lacking or where it excels, thus focusing on the treatment. By addressing this research gap, it opens a space to suggest actions to influence and manipulate the way in which it progresses.

Social work is unique for ‘… the strong interrelationship between theory and practice’ and knowledge being grounded in practice (Chenoweth & Mcauliffe 2012, p. 150). Sheppard (1998, p. 771) states social work is concerned with ‘practice validity’, which is the extent to which social work theory influences practice and conversely
practice shapes theory. Critical realism and the morphogenetic approach aim to explain a phenomenon in order to develop evidence-based practice and consideration of right conduct (Craig & Bigby 2005). The research project aims to understand and explain the prevalence and the varying ways environmental social work is being practically applied. This means identifying the range of social processes at work that drives the nature of environmental social work to be inclusive or exclusive. Pursuing evidence-based practice and the explanatory nature of critical realism aligns with social work’s emancipatory principles of developing empirically based theory and a strong relationship between theory and practice.

3.3 Phenomenology

The epistemological framework is informed by a phenomenological approach. A phenomenological approach refers to the tradition of interpretivism that looks to develop meaning through the lived experience of a phenomenon (Holloway 1997). Phenomenology allows the lived realities of the participant to be treated as reliable (Groenewald 2004). This research project is informed by phenomenology as it explores the lived experiences of social workers within the field; hoping to arrive at ‘…the essence of what the subject perceives’ (Houston & Mullan-Jensen 2011, 268). Phenomenology acknowledges that those who are practising environmental social work understand what practice entails. This research attempts to conceptualise the experiences of environmental social workers. The contrast between the subjective roles of the social workers against the objective position of the ecology fundamentally ties this research project to a critical realist perspective.
Chapter 4:
Methodology

Before discussing the data collection methods and analysis, it is imperative to define the key terms being used, not only for transparency but to give the research boundaries. The use of the words ‘pragmatic application’ is in relation to the philosophical understanding of pragmatism, which evaluates theories and frameworks in terms of the success of their practical application (Dewey 1920). Pragmatism is applicable as the research is concerned with practical outcomes – aiming to understand how and where environmental social work is being applied within NSW. The research employs Ramsay and Boddy’s (2017, p. 82) definition of environmental social workers which is ‘…in essence a social worker who is assisting humanity to create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem’. This definition of environmental social work will serve as a guide but will remain inductive. With the pragmatic application of environmental social work having little exploration, an inductive approach is necessary as the research will develop an understanding of environmental social work and how it is being applied from what is observed. An inductive approach serving to understand environmental social work from its practitioners is pivotal to mobilising the subfield. Furthermore, Part A and B of the research had qualification requirements, that is, participants had to be qualified social workers. The social work criterion does not disregard the wealth of practical knowledge of those without a qualification or a different qualification. However, to thoroughly understand the theory and practise of environmental social work, the boundary line was necessary. Additionally, Part A of the research placed geographical boundaries on the research; the participants had to be working within the state of NSW. The research was limited to within NSW as a larger investigation was not viable due to time constraints. The second section of the research was conducted with three environmental social workers, however all three were practising outside NSW.

The research project began as a process of mapping, but as will be further explained in the findings, there were few environmental social workers who were found practising in NSW. The few responses presented a valuable result; it indicated a
dissonance between the current social work literature – which acknowledges the responsibility of social work to be responding to environmental issues – and what is occurring in the field. To explore this dissonance, the research project added in-depth and semi-structured interviews with three accomplished environmental social work practitioners. The study, therefore, uses a multi-method approach as it applied two types of data collection (Creswell 2010). The research is divided into these two methods: survey (Part A) and interviews (Part B).

4.1 Part A – Survey

The mapping section of the research utilised a mixed methods approach as it combined qualitative and quantitative data to build a blended set of results. This approach is holistic as both quantitative and qualitative data is necessary for ‘adequately understanding human behaviour, whether individual, group or societal’ (Bazeley 2012, p. 4). A web-based concurrent survey was created to address the aims of the project, which allowed for the intertwining of both qualitative and quantitative methods to corroborate the findings. Furthermore, the concurrent approach allowed for both open and close-ended responses within the survey, which complemented the research design as it emphasised breadth (Creswell & Plano 2007). It is important to note a weakness of the concurrent data collection design which was the preclusion of follow-up on interesting or confusing responses (Driscoll et al. 2007). This weakness does provide a foundation for subsequent research projects and to further expand upon and analyse the qualitative realm of environmental social work literature.

The quantitative section of the survey was designed to map the environmental social workers’ locations and involved basic statistical analysis. There were two questions in the survey that generated quantitative data: postcodes and Likert scales. Postcodes were used to identify where environmental social workers are practising, and if there were geographical trends, clusters, and outliers. However, with so few responses, this mapping was inconclusive. The second generator of quantitative data was the Likert Scale, which assessed how useful the participants’ social work tools have been for their role. This analysis involved using percentages, averages, and analysing trends. The qualitative section analysed the type of environmental
social work practised, how it was being practised and furthermore, how social work skills were influencing their practice. The qualitative section built on the quantitative questions by analysing the meaningful variation and the relevant dimensions and values within environmental social work (Jansen 2010).

As Part A of the research aimed to describe a subgroup in-depth, homogeneous purposeful sampling was applied. Meaning organisations, groups, and individuals were contacted based on their knowledge and experience with the phenomenon of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, cited in Palinkas et al. 2015). The homogeneous characteristics of the participants were their environmental social work practice and geographical location (NSW). When attempting to construct the map, the research utilised as many recruitment lines as possible to locate environmental social workers. The survey was sent to thirty-seven non-government organisations, the Local Government New South Wales (LGNSW), and five environmental social work academics in NSW, along with these avenues, the research was advertised by the AASW in state bulletins, posted in five relevant Facebook groups, and passed on to environmental social work practitioners through a process of snowball sampling. Snowball sampling seeks to recruit research contacts from those who have already participated in the study (Handcock & Gile 2011). Participants were asked to pass on the survey to people they know in the field. This is particularly useful with hard-to-reach populations (Handcock & Gile 2011). Environmental social workers fit this category as practice is on the margins of the profession.

An inductive approach was applied to recruitment and the research more broadly, which allowed an openness whereby the research was able to follow the data. The research started with inductive observation (data-driven) and proceeded to abductively explain (observe and logically infer) (Hanson, cited in Woo, Boyle & Spector 2017). When the recruitment avenues were exhausted and scarcely any environmental social workers were found – rather than hypothesising – three practitioners who identified as being in field were interviewed and asked about the findings and if it aligned with their own experiences. This further reinforces the inductive approach as the research was not based on theory-driven hypotheses (Woo, Boyle & Spector 2017), but rather started with a clear purpose, and altered the methodology to expand and cross-validate the findings. Moreover, the inductive
approach to the research complemented the phenomenological epistemology as it is only from the knowledge of those practising can the profession begin to understand environmental social work.

Utilising a mixed methods approach allowed the qualitative and quantitative components to seamlessly work together to address the other’s limitations and develop a narrative that links analyses and interpretations (Bryman 2007; Shannon-Baker 2016). This approach matches the theoretical frameworks as the concurrent survey is able to capture the wide-ranging data of the participant, which is imperative in order to begin isolating causations and understanding the pragmatic application of environmental social work. Furthermore, the survey is a pertinent tool to analyse how social workers (the agents) are operating within and contributing to the shaping of environmental regeneration (the structure).

The survey underwent a detailed thematic analysis that aimed to reflect the experiences of environmental social workers. Thematic analysis is a process of pinpointing, examining and recording patterns that are important to the description of the phenomenon that the research aims to explore (Walter 2013). Thematic analysis was selected for its coherence and applicability in analysing qualitative data, particularly that which has been developed through a phenomenological lens (Denzin & Lincoln 2011).

4.2 Part B – Interviews

As previously mentioned, there was a comprehensive search to find social workers practising with an environmental ethos, and recruitment avenues (environmental organisations, NGO’s, Council, Government organisations, Universities, email distributions, social media, Australian Association of Social Workers) became exhausted. The few responses from the survey presented a vital opportunity, it showed a dissonance between research and practice. There is a strong body of literature that says – as social workers – we must be responding to environmental issues as they directly impact upon the core principles and the foundation of the profession, but as represented by the survey, this is not representative of what is occurring.
Rather than hypothesising why this is the case, and to further entrench and ground the research in practice, three in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with environmental social work practitioners. Potential participants were identified through the researcher’s and supervisor’s networks. The participants were invited based on their extensive practical experience. These participants were not involved in Part A of the research as they were located outside NSW. The interviews added depth as the participants began to explore the discrepancy between research and practice. Moreover, the research was able to further gain a deeper understanding of the practical application of environmental social work by their own experiences. By interviewing the participants about their own practice and how this relates to the data found in part A, the research was able to continue conceptualising and comprehending environmental social work and thus become closer to achieving the aim. Utilising a critical realist and morphogenetic lens, by unpacking the interactions between agents and structures, the research can isolate causations. That is to say, the research can unpack the causes behind why practice is not occurring and once the causal mechanisms are found, the subfield can begin focusing on the ‘treatment’ or methods to promote practice.

Given the small number of participants, the in-depth structure allowed for comprehensive and long-form interviews with each environmental social worker. The primary advantage of in-depth interviews is the room to gain more detailed and nuanced information (Boyce & Neale 2006). This was an appealing strength of in-depth interviews, particularly with the limited data gathered from the survey. The decision to make the interviews semi-structured ‘meant participants were free to elaborate or take the interview in new but related directions’ (Cook 2008, p. 422). As the research aim was to understand environmental social work from those in the field, if a structured interview was implemented, it would have run the risk of preventing practitioners from mentioning relevant points outside of the designated questions. This is particularly pertinent given the lack of exploration in this professional subfield. However, a weakness of such a format is the susceptibility to go off topic and move away from the intended purpose of the question. To mitigate this weakness, the aim of the research was clearly described to the participants. There was a set of five questions that formed the foundation of the interview. With
that being said, the semi-structured format allowed probing, clarification and exploration into avenues outside of these designated questions.

Open-ended questions provided participants with the opportunity to give elaborate answers regarding their experience. The five open-ended questions that laid the foundation for the interviews were:

1. What is your understanding of environmental social work?
2. How have you been practising environmental social work?
3. What are the key social work tools and skills useful in your practice?
4. My research has found that there are few environmental social workers practising in NSW. The literature emphasises the importance of the subfield, but this does not seem to be playing out on the ground – does your knowledge and your experience support these research findings? If so, how?
5. What strategies do you think are necessary to begin bridging the gap between research and practice?

The in-depth and semi-structured format nurtured exploration and understanding of the participants’ point of view. Furthermore, it was in alignment with the phenomenology framework and social work emancipatory principles.

Similar to Part A, a thematic analysis was applied to pinpoint and analyse patterns from the participants’ responses to the above questions. The flexibility of thematic analysis meant it was compatible with the phenomenological lens and the broader theoretical frameworks. For example, thematic analysis captures reoccurring patterns, while still understanding phenomena through the lived experience of the environmental social workers.

In adherence to the morphogenetic approach – there were two underpinning themes: the understanding and the treatment. The survey was focused on understanding environmental social work (figure 2), while the interviews focused on the treatment of environmental social work (figure 3). Albeit simplified, the below diagrams exemplify these aims of this project:
Where and how are social workers practicing?

What social work skills are they using?

What can we make from the environmental social workers experiences? (understanding the causal factors)

Why is practice scarce?

What strategies are necessary to begin bridging the gap?

How can we advocate for and enhance the role of environmental social work? (focusing on the treatment)
4.3 Limitations

The salient limitation of the study is the high probability that environmental social workers who are practising in NSW were not found. There was considerable effort to utilise as many different recruitment avenues as possible. This was necessary to ensure comprehensiveness and rigour. However, environmental practice is on the outskirts of the profession and there is an indication that many are not identifying with the term, hence there is a high likelihood that many practising environmental social workers in NSW who did not participate in the research.

The small sample size presents important data on the nature and prevalence of environmental social work in NSW. Though, due to such a small sample size, the conceptualisation and understanding of environmental social work through these participants is indicative and not representative of a broader exploratory understanding. In saying that, this research seeks to initiate a methodical investigation of the pragmatic application of environmental social which has been scarcely explored previously. Moreover, this research does not intend to make generalisations about environmental social work that is representative of the entire subfield, rather it aims to provide insight into how the participants are practising in environmental social work in NSW and present recommendations based on these findings.

It is important to flag that the majority of participants were involved in higher education as social work academics. This is considered a limitation as an objective of the research was to entrench it in practice. It is important to note that a few of the participants worked as both academics and active practitioners. Nonetheless, the struggle to find practitioners does provide a frame of reference — representing that environmental social work is developing theoretically but inadequately translating on the ground.

The weight phenomenology places on the subjective experience has a drawback; that of reliability and generalisability (Leung 2015). Particularly as there is an interpretive role to phenomenology — the interviewee will inevitably be influenced by the researcher (Brocki & Wearden 2006). For example, the researcher will prioritise
certain themes over others (Brocki & Wearden 2006). Transparency was used to address this limitation, meaning there was a clear articulation of the research aim and the purpose of the interview. Moreover, the participants’ words were used when possible in the data analysis section. This was to ensure the reader is aware of the interpretations made by the researcher.

Another weakness is that phenomenology is the ‘focused locality’ of a particular moment in time (Leung 2015, p. 326). This means phenomenology often lacks generalisability, that is, the replication of the study in other settings may not produce the same results. As phenomenological research is not usually generalisable, this places an added importance on replication. Replication helps distinguish whether the variability between respondents is due to either measurement procedures or some other influencing factor, such as geographical location. Despite these limitations, the research maintains that the best way to understand environmental social work was through the perspective of the practitioners themselves. As argued by Parahoo (cited in Shi 2011, p. 11), ‘phenomenology stresses that only those experience phenomena are capable of communicating them to others’.

Part A of the research was bound to the geographical borders of NSW which makes the results vulnerable to sampling bias (Fadem 2009). Results could potentially have connotations that are specific to NSW. For example, on the World Risk Index for vulnerability and exposure to natural disasters, Australia is ranked 121 out of 171 countries (Lotte Kirch et al. 2017). Therefore, social workers may be more widespread in areas pertaining to disaster relief in more vulnerable nations. Although droughts do have a considerable effect on the Australian environment (Nipperess & Boddy 2018). Stechlik (cited in Nipperess & Boddy 2018, p. 549) points out that droughts are ‘not a named disaster’, therefore they often do not get dealt accordingly. Another example of sampling bias relevant to this research project is food security. According to the Global Food Security Index (2017), Australia is ranked 5th in the world for food security. The index takes into consideration affordability, availability and quality, and safety. This may not be as prevalent for environmental social workers in Australia as it is in China, who are ranked 45th (Global Food Security Index 2017). For example, Bun Ku and Yan (2018) and their
project team consisting of social workers are addressing food safety problems in the north-eastern region of Yunnan province in southwest China.

This study hopes to make an important contribution to the slowly developing field of environmental social work and stimulate further dialogue but acknowledges its limitations. These limitations demonstrate the importance of the Popperian dictum of falsifiability (Leung 2015), meaning the study should be replicated and attempted to be refuted. Particularly in other geographical areas and accordingly, this research serves as a guide to do so.
Chapter 5:
Data Analysis

The data collected for this study presents vital insights into the application of environmental social work. On the surface, findings demonstrate a scarce application due to the small number of participants. Though accurate, deeper investigation reveals a more complex finding, with compounded factors that resulted in the small-scale data set. The analysis of the survey (Part A) sheds light on the prevalence of environmental social work; how and where participants are practising; and what social work skills and tools they are using. The interviews (Part B) continue to analyse how participants are practising and what skills they are using, however, with a larger focus on the underlying reasons behind why practice is scarce and what strategies are necessary to begin bridging the gap between research and practice. The implications section then amalgamates the two data sets to cross validate and interpret the findings, and additionally, puts forth recommendations for future practice and research.

This research project received ethical clearance by the Human Research Ethics Committee at Western Sydney University (see Appendix A). There were two amendments made to the project that required additional approval. The project initially intended to map Sydney, perhaps idealistically, as the difficulties of finding environmental social workers quickly became apparent. The research scope was then broadened to NSW, and ethical approval was received (see Appendix B). As mentioned above, when there were still only a few social workers found, the research was altered to explore why this is the case. These interviews were also granted ethics clearance (see Appendix C).

The succeeding data analysis is intertwined with the discussion. Therefore, there was an interpretation of the data and relation back to the literature review. There are occasions where additional research papers and ideas that were not discussed in the literature review were added as they became pertinent. By intertwining the analysis with the discussion, the paper was able to develop a more cohesive and sequential narrative.
5.1 Part A – Survey

The survey started with two screening questions: ‘are you a qualified social worker?’ and ‘are you currently working in New South Wales?’ Twelve people began the survey, however, 5 were screened out as they were not qualified, social workers. A further 3 were screened out as they were not working in NSW – leaving the survey with a total of 4 participants. On the surface, the small number of participants could be interpreted as a negative finding, however, this is far from the case. The small number of participants presents an important finding. The backdrop of the environmental social work literature highlights that the subfield has to be both a theory and a practice (Dominelli 2018). Yet, this research project found that the practice of environmental social work is lacking application.

Three people were screened out due to no social work qualification. In some social work subfields, it is common for people to be hired without accreditation (Brown et al. 2015). The three participants that were screened out in this survey could suggest a similar phenomenon is occurring within the environmental social work subfield. Although, more substantial research would be required to establish whether or not this is the case. The following question asked participants what year they graduated from university, which showed a relatively even distribution among year categories, with no clusters. With that being said, there were no participants who graduated between 2010 and present, which could be revealing of the current low levels of environmental social work education in curriculums.

5.1.1 Identification

As hypothesised in the literature review, the issues around identification manifested in the survey, with half of participants identifying with the term ‘environmental social worker’ and the other half not identifying. One participant stated:

*The environmental projects and research undertake [sic] are part of my practice as an activist and community worker. So I don’t think I have ever used the term environmental social worker*
This participant does not identify with the term and instead umbrella's environmental undertakings as part of their activist and community work. This suggests a lack of prevalence or awareness surrounding the term, thus providing experiential data that aligns with Coats & Gray’s (2011) anecdotal evidence of environmental social work being practised on the margins. Another participant did not identify with the term due to their academic occupation, implying that to be an environmental social work, one has to be practising. An overlapping theme from the participants who did identify was the awareness of the interdependent relationship between human well-being and the natural environment. As a participant wrote:

“One cannot be a social worker without understanding the interdependent relationship between human well-being and the natural environment.”

This understanding was key to identification with the term, although was not limited the only reason. As one social worker’s identification was entwined with their promotion and support of veganism, stating:

“I see this as wholly [sic] compatible with social work values and goals as it promotes environmental justice, and the well-being of human beings via aiding the environment…"

5.1.2 Pragmatic application

When the participants were asked what type of organisation they worked for, 3 participants stated they were employed by a University and one participant worked in a community development organisation. This finding is representative of the immense difficulty locating environmental social workers on the ground. Not only was there a small response rate, but those who were found were largely in an academic setting. The snowballing method can help explain such a tilted finding. However, the finding aligns with the current social work literature, which indicates an academic change, but the practical application is still uncommon and largely unexplored (Hetherington & Boddy 2013; Miller & Hayward 2014; Ramsay & Boddy 2016).
Participants were then asked what responsibilities and duties were involved in their work. The majority (3 out of 4) reported their primary responsibilities were academic duties such as teaching, research, and writing. However, participants also described partaking in systemic advocacy, management, and community-engaged collaborative projects.

One participant, when discussing how their environmental social work was applied, wrote:

_In my paid work (3 days week) I try to encourage environmental awareness and justice into the organisations [sic] processes. In my unpaid work (2 days per week) I work for an organisation that promotes [sic] veganism, supports vegans, and supports the vegan social movement…_

Half the participants stated that their work as an environmental social worker focuses on improving non-human life. ‘Human’ rights have been foundational to social works core values, however, over half of the participants recognise and extend their social work practice to be inclusive of non-human life. This poses a ‘major ontological challenge’ for the profession (J Ife 2018, personal communication, 9 August). The participant’s response above outlines two different approaches to their environmental social work. In their paid work, the participant encourages environmental awareness and justice, suggesting it is not the primary purpose of the organisation. Rather, they are implementing and using covert environmental skills into organisational processes. Whereas the participant’s unpaid work is primarily promoting and supporting non-human life. The unpaid/volunteer characteristic of environmental social work may be symptomatic of barriers preventing practice.

There were no social workers found who worked in disaster relief. This is surprising given the large prevalence of drought, floods and bushfires in Australia (Nipperess & Boddy 2018). Furthermore, there were no social workers found working in non-government organisations, environmental public policy, or activist organisations.
5.1.3 Education

Using a Likert scaling question ranging from 0-10 (figure 4; below), participants were asked about how well informed they were about ecology and the environment prior to getting their job. 0 represented no prior knowledge and 10 represented a sound understanding.

Figure 4: How well informed were you about ecology and the environment prior to getting your job?

The answers were concordant – expressing little to moderate prior knowledge about the environment. As the above figure represents, there were no participants who went into their role with a sound environmental literacy. Correspondingly, using a Likert scale (figure 5; below), participants were asked how useful their social work skills and tools have been for their role. With 0 signifying no use at all and 10 signifying the contrary.

Figure 5: On a scale of 0-10, how useful have your social work skills and tools been for your role?

As the above figure demonstrates, there was a unanimous response from the participants, showing that their social work tools and skills were immensely pertinent
and useful. No participant ranked the usefulness of their social work skills below an 8, and notably, 3 of the participants responded with a 10 on the Likert scale. The data gathered from both these Likert scales were congruent. They infer that social work does provide the skills and tools for environmental undertakings (Figure 5), but social workers were not well informed about ecology and the environment going into the role (Figure 4).

This data highlights the direct consequences of social work curriculums being absent of ecological education. This supports Miller and Hayward’s (2014) finding that social workers lack environmental literacy when going into the workplace. The data suggest that environmental social work practice is individualised, that is, social workers have become well informed about ecology and the environment on their own accord.

Participants were asked then what social work skills and tools have been most useful for their environmental social work role. The second round of coding presented the following themes:

*Table 1: Characteristics of Findings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct theme</th>
<th>Second Cycle Coding</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>- Verbal / Written</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Online skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Negotiation</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Group work</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Engagement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Social Change</td>
<td>- Policy development</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Research</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Social action skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Practice</td>
<td>- Critical analysis</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Reflective practice</td>
</tr>
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Three out of the four participants found their ability to communicate was advantageous for their role. This involved verbal communication and engagement with and between individuals, groups and communities. One participant stated
communication was important for negotiation and public relations. Half of the participants stated their online and technological skills were valuable for their roles. Communication encompassed sub-themes including community organisation and engagement, which were valuable tools for half of the participants. Many participants reported using skills that promoted social change such as policy development, systemic advocacy, and social action strategies. Research skills were a reoccurring theme, which is an expected result given the large number of academics participating in the survey. Research skills were categorised under the ‘social change’ theme as research can provide an opportunity for social workers ‘to better understand, defend and help their clients’ and advocate for social change (Ünlü, cited in Erbay 2017, p. 395). Half of the participants stated that critical and reflective practice were important skills for their role. The high response rate and multiplicity of responses further confirm the usefulness of social work skills and tools for environmental practice.

5.2 Part B – Interviews

The interviews aimed to further explore environmental social work with three participants who had wide-ranging experiences of practice. The interviews also aimed to unpack the data gathered in Part A and focus on moving the subfield forward. That is to ask, why is there a scarce application and how can we advocate and enhance the role of environmental social work? The research is rooted in phenomenology as this is pivotal to the understanding of environmental social work practice from those that are applying it, therefore, when possible, the words of the participants were used. This adds transparency and substantiates the findings (Pringle et al. 2011). All quotations were presented verbatim. Two of the interviews were conducted using the video conferencing software ‘Zoom’. While, the other interview was recorded at the ‘Social Work, Education and Development’ conference in Dublin. The interviews were transcribed manually, and then a thematic analysis was applied. The data will be presented and analysed in order of the questions asked. To ensure confidentiality and for the ease of the reader, the three participants were given pseudonyms: Nicole, Rita, and Charlie.
5.2.1 Conceptualising environmental social work

The participants were first asked the question: ‘what is your understanding of environmental social work’. A common theme was the interdependent relationship between nature and humans. This was also prevalent in Part A. As Rita said:

\[\text{[w]ell it’s actually acknowledging that humans are nature; that we are not separate from.}\]

Nicole reinforced this notion, stating there was an ‘artificial distinction’ between nature and humans, which was embodied in the Western ways of practising social work. These responses align with the environmental social work literature which emphasises the need to move beyond the person-in-environment framework. When expanding on this idea, Nicole noted:

\[\text{It's about space, water, air, physical amenity, and increasingly about climate change, about our atmosphere and our weather. It’s about food as well, agricultural systems and access to food and about living with an ecosystem which is very damaged in most cases in the world. So, that’s sort of what I see purview of environment social work as.}\]

Thus, demonstrating the interdependent relationship between humans and ecology at every level. Alternatively put by Rita:

\[\text{For me, it’s just acknowledging that and seeing that our wellbeing and our health is so intimately connected to the health of the systems. If you’re not doing it, you are doing unsustainable practice and that’s a problem}\]

Rita proceeded to discuss that environmental social work ought to consider species other than humans. The need for the social work profession to move beyond an anthropogenic profession was a reoccurring theme. Seventy-two prevent of the participants in Part A and B mentioned the necessity to advocate for the non-human world. This was not always the case, for example, Nicole’s explanations of environmental social work were centred around the socio-environmental:
I came across a couple of papers when I was researching for my lecture last year and I did find a couple of social workers, but they weren’t working with clients, they were just doing that [community gardening] themselves… I don’t want to be critical of them. It was an insightful paper… but I don’t think they were actually working with clients professionally in that setting.

Another theme arising from the interviews was the overlapping of the participants’ personal lives with their professional practice. Two of the three interviewees discussed the attempts to bring congruence between the personal and professional. As Nicole said:

_In my own life, I’ve always been pretty political as a person since a young age and I’ve taken that orientation into my work as a social worker and into my practice as a social worker. And so, I think my espousal of environmental social work is easier for me or it’s something that has come more naturally to me because I’ve been involved in quite a lot of campaigning activities._

Similarly, Rita stated:

_It’s been interesting for me because the gap between the personal and professional has actually collapsed over the last 5 or 6 years. It doesn’t mean I’m not a professional practitioner around engaging and doing that stuff. But what it means is, I see this as active citizenship and everything that I do in my personal life, as a part of a friend’s group, as part of community gardens is a part of my eco-social work practice._

This overlays between personal and professional is indicative of the individualisation of environmental social work practice. As environmental social work is seldom taught in universities and practice is uncommon, those that are practising have done so – in spite of barriers – and have often combined their personal lives with their professional practice. Correspondingly, this speaks to the volunteer nature of the subfield as manifested in Part A.
McKinnon’s (2013) article directly addresses the congruence between social workers personal and professional lives, where she found that social workers were passionate about environmental issues and made direct changes in their own lives as a result. However, McKinnon (2013, p. 162) found that the ‘the majority of participants had not found a way to successfully incorporate their environmental understanding and concerns into their professional practice’. This was relevant in this study, but more pronounced was that the participants were attempting to bring them in congruence, despite the barriers. McKinnon (2013, p. 166) found that participants did not want ‘to “impose” their personal views on clients, groups, or communities with whom they worked’. This was a similar notion expressed by Nicole. As social workers are often working with disadvantaged groups, there are social barriers preventing many people from accessing organic food or healthy environments (see Byrne 2015; World Health Organisation 2013). Thus, Nicole was cautious when incorporating her environmental social work practice into social services, stating that they did not want to put added demands on clients.

*I’ve been careful about not putting those demands on my clients and not talking about environmental concerns unless they raise them with me themselves. And that’s out of respect for the constraints they’ve got of people with extremely low incomes. When accessing things like organic food or getting into a cleaner environment without air pollution or noise pollution is really hard and impossible so I talk about other aspects of their lives with them, not those.*

Similar to McKinnon’s (2013, p. 168) findings, there is a divide between social workers professional life and ‘their personal realm, with the environment and nature currently relegated very much to the personal sphere’. However, the social workers interviewed have been applying skills that bridge this divide and stretch social works traditional boundaries. These applications will be detailed in 5.2.2 and 5.2.5.

### 5.2.2 Overt and covert practice

The three participants had wide-ranging experiences of environmental social work practice. When using a thematic analysis to examine the data, there was a notable
differentiation between applications, and this was separated into two categories: overt and covert practice. Practices were separated based on their purpose and setting. Covert practices incorporated environmental undertakings into social services and healthcare settings. Additionally, the primary purpose of the service was not environmentally-focused. Whereas the overt practices were directly focused on ecology, the non-human world and the relationship between humans and nature. These practices tended to occur outside ‘traditional’ social work settings. The table below is an attempt to encapsulate these differences.

Table 2: Categorising environmental social work practice

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overt</th>
<th>Covert</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Designing an adventure playground</td>
<td>Counselling outdoors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adventure therapy</td>
<td>Recycling / waste management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bicycle education program</td>
<td>Outdoor walking meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Climate campaigner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community gardens</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conservation work</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disaster relief</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental advocacy</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is important to note that the table was created from the participants’ practice, which may not translate well to a larger analysis of practice as there may be applications that do not fit this classification or seemingly fit both. Instead, the table is a result of the specific practice variation uncovered from this dataset. Different taxonomies may be required for larger or international investigations of practice.

Nicole previously worked at a youth justice facility and incorporated environmental social work practice by:

*Tak[ing] the young people in the unit out regularly to the beach and to go bushwalking*

This is an example of covert practice as the primary purpose is to work with young offenders. When Nicole worked with at-risk young woman, she said:
I barely meet anyone inside. Maybe if I had, a young woman who I was working with that had a physical disability and it meant that it was harder, I wouldn’t have done that. But every other [sic] of the girls, I went out on bush walks with them, I went to the beach and we did a lot of our work that way in engaging with them and also working through our agreements and doing assessment work – we did it outside and also working through case plans, a lot of it was crisis management. But, I made sure that they were in the outdoors a lot. And they all seemed to like it.

Rita used a similar technique:

… I would always be looking for opportunities to connect with [the environment] and use some of those processes. When I worked as a counsellor, I used to have walking appointments. Walking by the river, rather than sitting in the office because it doesn’t make any sense to me. Why would you sit in the office when you can be out walking, and it brings you side to side with the people. It positions that relationship as more side by side, otherwise, it can be quite confronting.

Recycling and waste management was considered a part of Nicole and Charlie’s environmental social work practice. As quoted from Nicole:

Wherever I have worked, I’ve always been the person within the service that has tried to make sure that recycling is working OK.

The environmental social work literature that has investigated practice has done so through the format of case studies (see Gray, Coates & Hetherington, 2012; Dominelli 2018), which has often focused on large scale/overt practice such as disaster relief, climate change action, community organising, restoration and corporate social responsibility. Interestingly though, the majority of the participants considered environmental social work as a much broader practice that they have incorporated into their personal lives and into social service agencies. As summed up by Rita:
I think once you start thinking about the environment and trying to practice in your own individual space and place; bringing cutlery, cups, just those small micro-actions – right through to being involved in setting up community gardens.

Alongside the covert practice, all three participants had extensive overt experience, as represented in table 2. Rita had worked in conservation, social farming, and community gardening. Social farming and community gardening focus on localising and connecting agricultural products, along with reconnecting people with these processes and the natural world. As put by Rita:

… so apart of my practice is about reconnection – supporting people to reconnect to the earth systems so that they can live more mindfully or more peacefully

Rita discussed community gardening as a clear nexus between social work and environmentalism. A space that presents exciting opportunities for social workers:

Because I see the community gardens as leaders and around waste management, soil, growing food – all of that stuff – water use, and they are little centres were people can be reskilled in connection to earth and they can try it at their leisure, so they don’t get this full-on blast. They can go there, feel good and then take some of that.

Charlie focused on disaster relief and recovery help. Charlie emphasised the importance of extending disaster relief beyond the immediate crisis phase and reconstructing and building capacity. When discussing her disaster relief work in Nepal, Charlie stated:

We are now in the kind of reconstruction phase where it’s about income generation and we are helping women to feed children by growing vegetables and to try sell those and also to help them get goats. Goats are one of the livestock that women can grow or raise without having to give money to the man.
Charlie noted that goats can have a disastrous effect on ecosystems which is why they are working with an interdisciplinary team including agricultural experts to help mitigate the impact of the goats. To do this they will use rotational grazing. Charlie worked in a variety of different nations, building capacity after natural disasters.

Nicole’s practice experiences ranged from policy development, adventure therapy, coordination of an adventure playground, running a bicycle education program, and working as a national climate campaigner. Nicole said a big part of the adventure playground was:

\[\text{… looking after the land that we had, encouraging the kids to be environmentally aware.}\]

Nicole expanded on the activities run through the adventure playground stating:

\[\text{We always managed to talk to them [the kids] about managing paint and waste and we cleaned up a lot of rubbish and waste. We used recyclable materials that we got from sites and donations. We had some animals there, we had a sheep, geese, rabbits at times, and we took the kids camping a lot and on trips, bushwalking trips. We went to the snow in winter and went to the beach in summer. So, we did a whole range of different activities. We also encouraged them to ride. So, we spent a lot of time fixing bikes and making sure had helmets and getting bikes from places. There was a lot of that activity going on.}\]

Nicole employed an Aboriginal artist to conduct environmentally themed projects. Nicole took Aboriginal kids on camping trips to meet family members and Elders. She stated this was another part of their ‘ecological and environmental education’. This links into the subsect of the literature that emphasises the importance of incorporating Aboriginal and Indigenous ways of knowing. Baskin (2011) and Holthaus (2008) (cited in Gray, Coates & Hetherington 2012) demonstrate how the sacredness of Earth is fundamental to many Indigenous peoples. Forty-one per cent of environmental social work articles mentions the importance of incorporating
Indigenous worldviews (Ramsay & Boddy 2015). Nicole’s work provides an example of how Indigenous ways of knowing can be translated into practice.

Environmental social work, as stated by Nipperess and Boddy (2018), ‘advocates for working at both a community and individual level’. The preponderance of practice was at these levels, however, Nicole also practised on a structural or systemic level. This was through her work as a national climate campaigner for a national environmentally aware political party. Nicole stated that although it was not a social work specific role, she constantly drew upon their social work skills:

*I took a sort of social work lens to the campaign in the sense that I could see that a lot of the activities were very centred around the MP’s and legislation and I knew that we had to build things on the ground in order to achieve the policy changes that we needed to, and to build public awareness. I think it was effective actually, but we weren’t the only ones in that space obviously. But we were definitely very active in it.*

The pertinence and usefulness of social work skills were prevalent among all three participants. This will be further explored below.

5.2.3 Key social work tools and skills

The effectiveness of social work skills for environmental practice is in congruence with the findings in Part A. The response was overwhelmingly positive; all participants spoke favourably about existing social work skills and their usefulness in environmental practice. Even when Nicole was not in a direct social work role, she drew upon her social work skills:

*It wasn’t a social work role, it was a political campaign, but I did draw on my skills a lot; my social work skills. The skills that I drew on were community development, advocacy skills, working with stakeholders, encouraging local branches to be actively involved.*
The ability of social workers to communicate and organise was prevalent in the interviews, as Rita said:

*In this space, you sometimes get people who are very committed but have interpersonal difficulties… it can be really hard, and you really need to use your social work skills in holding groups, and conflict transformation.*

As shown in the following graph, interpersonal and communication were the most valued skills for Nicole, Rita, and Charlie. This is analogous with Part A. The skills mentioned below are a result of two cycles of coding, therefore, there were other skills mentioned that became grouped by an encompassing code. For example, debriefing was coded under ‘critical reflection’ and conflict transformation was classified under ‘group skills’.

*Figure 6: Representing the skills that were used in practice and their prevalence*
The graph shows many skills mentioned in Part A; representing consistency among the skills environmental social workers are finding pertinent and useful in the field. The overlapping skills include research, engagement, group work, reflective practice, community development, and social action skills.

Rita expressed frustration about social work’s theoretical frameworks failing to incorporate the environment:

…[S]ocial workers are good at systems thinking. That’s our strength, that’s what we get. It’s bizarre to me, that we don’t go that extra bit. We don’t go into the extra system. It’s connected to social workers being a modernist profession, that emerged out of modernity.

Systems theory focuses on the ‘interactions between people and systems in the social environment’ (Pincus & Minahan, cited in Zapf 2010). Akin to the person-in-environment framework, considerations of ecology have been historically beyond the scope of the framework. Hence Rita stated, ‘we don’t go that extra bit’.

Charlie, who predominantly practises in disaster relief situations stated her social work skills have been immensely useful. When beginning in disaster relief work, Charlie travelled to the country stressed by the natural disaster but realised this was not effective, as she stated, people worried about the foreigners – sometimes more than themselves. Instead, Charlie decided to set up helplines, raise funds and help in other ways. Additionally, Charlie emphasised the importance of social workers practising with an interdisciplinary approach and linking up with people. For example, Charlie was in the process of getting funding for early warning systems, which can help warn people to turn off electricity and gas before the disaster strikes. She is hoping to get these warning messages on smartphone applications. However, for this to happen, social workers need to work in collaboration with seismologists and IT professionals; reiterating the importance of an interdisciplinary approach and effective communication skills. This notion is exemplified by Charlie’s comment:

… it has to be interdisciplinary and both environmental scientists and social workers have to work together because at the end of the day, when an
environmental disaster strikes – whether natural or human-made – it’s the social workers who have to work with the people and provide them with the necessary material, resources, the psychosocial support for PTSD disorders which do arise.

This was in alignment with the environmental social work literature, which discusses the importance of working in interdisciplinary teams (Dominelli 2012; Norton 2012; Miller & Hayward 2014; Ramsay & Boddy 2016; Dominelli 2018). Rita used an interdisciplinary approach when organising a community garden conference:

*It was bringing together business, academics, and civil society – the three sectors.*

Charlie stated generic skills such as identifying needs, counselling, debriefing, finding allies, and crisis intervention was valuable in her disaster relief role, however averring that these skills only scratch the surface. She proceeded to accentuate the necessity of environmental social work education as this can increase awareness and give students the necessary skills to adequately support individuals and communities in reconstruction and capacity building. For example, Charlie found that understanding international and national law has been beneficial for contingency planning. Such skills can be taught to social workers in higher education.

Nicole and Rita mentioned incorporating grassroots social work into their practice, that is, identifying the needs of the community, and then acting according to these needs. Below is an example of how Rita used this in her practice:

*When I was setting up a community garden, I saw that there were a lot of gaps. So, this is where social work fits in… [w]e actually need to engage with people to see what they want. We don’t get to decide what their needs are – they do. That’s the bottom up, ownership stuff. Your social work skills come into play.*

When organising the community garden conference, rather than a top-down approach, Rita used her social work skills by conducting:
…a survey to understand what people wanted… they identified the gaps and we provided sessions that would meet some of those gaps.

Nicole reinforced this notion when she was employed as the national climate campaigner for a national environmentally aware political party. She coordinated the activities of the local branches around the country and drew upon her grassroots social work practice:

… one thing I wouldn’t have done if I wasn’t a social worker was to make sure that the local branches had access to the back end of the website. We had a web page for every branch which I don’t think would have happened in that way if I hadn’t been in the campaign role and sort of leading the coordination of the activities of all those groups because a different person might have ignored the local groups or just not realised their wealth and what they can contribute, and the need to have them very heavily involved.

To be able to actively identify needs and work with communities, Rita said, interpersonal skills, group work, and conflict transformation are imperative.

The importance of community development skills and dialogue was also raised by Rita. She discussed how a person in a powerful position had told her ‘the community don’t like being called leaders’, but Rita pushed back against the comment because she considered herself a part of that community:

… [they were] positioning me as an academic, so it became us and them; them being the community… [they] said the community don’t like to be called leaders, and I’m thinking, ‘yes I do’.

This shows how Rita does not want to come from a top-down approach that creates a dichotomy between community and bodies of power, but instead, she positioned herself as part of the community. As Donovan, Rose and Connolly (2017) said, ‘…social workers, after all, are part of their communities’. This kind of grass-roots practice and dialogue is pivotal for significant environmental social work.
When asked about the usefulness of social work skills, there was an overwhelmingly unanimous response – in both part A and B. All participants said that existing social work skills were advantageous for their roles. This response from the practitioners was supported by the body of research. Ramsay and Boddy’s (2017) concept analysis found all authors held that ‘existing social work skills’ were ‘useful in addressing effects and mitigating environmental degradation’. This shows a congruency between the research and the participant’s responses, both in the survey and the interviews. This is a noteworthy finding and typified by Rita:

_Social work skills are the business – this is who we need. We need the skills that social workers have. We’ve got systems thinking. We’ve got theorizing, power, all of that critical theorising. We’ve got practical skills around how might change happen. That’s knowledge, theory, and values._

This demonstrates that when practice is occurring, social workers are finding their tools useful, but it fails to explain why practice is scarce in the field. The next question was asked to directly address this question, and further make sense of the findings in Part A.

### 5.2.4 Scarcity of practice

During the interview, the participants were given a background of the research conducted in Part A. This included reference to how the project initially started as a mapping process but found few environmental social workers practising in NSW. The researcher then explained that the literature emphasises the importance of the subfield, but this does not seem to be playing out on the ground. Once explained, the participants were then asked if their knowledge and experience supported these research findings? And if so, how?

Participants – anecdotally – affirmed the findings, saying that practice on the ground is scarce. However, they also identified and discussed other factors influencing these findings. Rita stated, albeit seldom, there are social workers who are practising and ecologically aware, but they would not be identifying or calling themselves environmental social workers because ‘that is a new positioning’. Comparable to the
findings in Part A – there is a problem with identification and this research project is confirming that the subfield is not yet mobilised. Rita gave an example of a fellow acquaintance who she described as a ‘traditional, service delivery orientated social worker’. This acquaintance had set up a community garden in their spare time, wanting to have the necessary skills to look after one’s self. Rita stated that this acquaintance would not identify as an environmental social worker, but ‘gets the dilemma we are in’ – referring to environmental degradation and accelerated climate change. Rita mentioned that she suspects people are seeing it as personal and not professional practice:

I suspect there are a lot that are doing things but not identifying or bringing it into their practice because they are doing it outside. And it’s when I start talking about eco-social work you can see that people go ‘oh right, I’ve been keeping it separate but I can see how it would be a part of’

Nicole and Charlie reiterated the problem of identification. Nicole said:

I think there are definitely social workers who are working in this space that don’t realise they are probably, and they would be people working in outward bound sort of services and in adventure-based educational therapy. I know there are social workers in those settings.

When Charlie was talking about her experiences in the disaster relief setting, she discussed that after a disaster, social workers provide psychosocial support, which is particularly needed for children as there might be ‘behaviour that is inappropriate and regressive in terms of their development’. She then went on to say:

But they [social workers] don’t associate that with the environment – they associate that with just working with children and families. So, I think that’s the big issue there.

This raises an important question for future research: how can we mobilise the environmental social work subfield? The data – in part A and B – confirm that social work skills are useful for addressing ecological issues and ‘promoting a biodiverse
planetary ecosystem’ (Ramsay and Boddy 2017, p. 82). Yet, there is a lack of knowledge, identification, and practice. Mobilising the subfield means to bring together those who are practising (particularly those who are not identifying) in this space to work in a coordinated way that aims to promote environmental justice, regeneration, and social change. As Nicolini, Powell and Korica (2014, p. 9) point out, in order to mobilise, there needs to be an understanding of the phenomena, and therefore, ‘one has to start by observing the practice itself’. This project has attempted to address this. However, as the authors elaborate, one needs to understand the ‘conditions and processes that underpin the individual and collective knowledgeability’ and enable the accomplishment of the activity (Nicolini, Powell & Korica 2014, p. 9). The conditions and processes that underpin environmental social work need further exploring – both factors that inhibit and promote practice.

Nicole mentioned she has been ‘practising on the margins’ since environmental social work is on the outskirts of the profession. To be able to do this, she has had to practice ‘carefully’, indicating towards impediments or inhibitors preventing practice. After two cycles of thematic coding, 3 key barriers were identified: education, organisations, and income generation.

Education was a barrier preventing practice but is also a tool capable of promoting practical applications. Education was considered an inhibitor as students currently graduate with little knowledge of ecology or environmental social work, which is a finding documented and reinforced by Harris and Boddy (2017), Jones (2013), and Miller and Hayward (2014). As Nicole put it:

*I think social work education is not taking the environmental work that we need to do seriously at all. It touches on it tangentially.*

…I think that’s a big problem; a major problem. The eight components of social work practice, they don’t refer to it at all. It’s now in our social work standards and referred to in our code of ethics on a number of occasions but it’s sort of hanging there and it’s not being implemented in our education system… It’s not embedded properly in our professional training and development and our education systems as a profession.
This leads into an interesting area – the role of governing bodies professional documents and their effects. Bowles et al. (2018) examined the social work codes of ethics in Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Each of these codes serves to ‘establish the parameters of social work interest and action’, making it important to analyse how environmental social work is considered within these documents (Bowles et al. 2018, 512). Bowles’ et al. (2018) findings show that the AASW’s code of ethics is the most inclusive of the natural environment with direct concern for the environment and the relationship between ecology and human well-being. Bowles et al. (2018) point out that further research needs to explore the awareness and implications of this inclusivity. This makes sense in light of Nicole’s earlier comment that the inclusion of environmental social work into various governing documents has not yet resulted in any practical chances since ‘it’s sort of hanging there’ and failing to be implemented.

Charlie stated that practice is scarce on the ground because social workers ‘have not been encouraged to see environmental issues’. Charlie proceeded to explain that raising consciousness about environmental social work is a pivotal part of her role. What is clear from the data in part A and B is that including environmental social work in curriculums is a necessary and important step. As there is a problem of identification, increased prevalence and knowledge of environmental social work in education is an important step to mobilisation. Future research can then investigate: if social work education does become inclusive towards environmental social work, and whether this will, in turn, have direct practical implications?

Jones (2010) grapples with this question and puts forth that adding environmental social work units into the curriculum is not enough. There is a slow but positive change occurring in social work education with more environmental units and content being added, though Harris & Boddy (cited in Nipperess & Boddy 2018) find it is ‘sometimes cursory’. This is why Jones (2010, p. 73) argues for the use of Mezirow’s (1990) ‘transformative learning’ pedagogy; whereby students are encouraged to critically challenge what is acquired uncritically through ‘dominant sociocultural assumptions’. This is particularly pertinent as social work is a modernist profession that has held Western notions that humans are separate from nature or dominant over nature (Coates 2003; Ife 2016; Boetto 2017; Dominelli 2018). Jones
(2018) argues that transformative learning should be coupled with Education for Sustainability (EfS). EfS, as the name suggests, is a pedagogical framework concerned with equipping people with ecological knowledge, skills and understanding, with the overarching aim of creating a sustainable future (Australian Research Institute in Education for Sustainability 2009). Jones (2010) puts forth that these two alternative pedagogical frameworks offer an important footing for introducing environmental orientations into social work education.

Rita and Nicole found organisations to be a barrier, often inhibiting environmental social work practice. As Nicole said:

\[
I \text{ think my espousal of environmental social work is easier for me or it’s something that has come more naturally to me because I’ve been involved in quite a lot of campaigning activities. And sometimes I’ve extended those to within my work in the sector. Not always, because it’s not encouraged, in fact, it’s highly discouraged.}
\]

Nicole went on to talk about how she censored her environmental social work promotion when working in social service settings:

\[
\ldots \text{ there is this suspicion about political activity by social work practitioners and I think we censor ourselves in that space as well – I know I do and that’s why I’ve been so intensely involved in [Australian political party] because I knew that I was pretty limited in what I could achieve in my professional life. So, I found other avenues to exercise my responsibility that I see as a citizen. I do see it as my professional responsibility to be involved in environmental social work – I really do.}
\]

Rita had similar experiences but in higher education:

\[
\text{Because it’s [environmental social work] still on the margins… when I was trying to do this work in the university, I was managed out.}
\]
When related back to the theoretical frameworks, the interaction between structure and agency comes to the forefront. With the structure as ‘organisations’ and agency as ‘social workers’, organisations lay the foundations for action. Applying the realist perspective to the data, the participants’ experiences in organisations have hindered their environmental social work practice. As Rita said, environmental social work has been ‘marginalised right out’. The morphogenetic approach offers valuable guidance for these barriers. Archer (1995) puts forth that agents are embedded within the structural and cultural circumstances and their actions proceed to modify or sustain this cycle. The social workers have been adapting their practice to overcome these barriers, attempting to modify this cycle. For example, Nicole discussed the need for environmental social workers to advocate internally within these services and workplaces. Thus, attempting to modify the cycle and alter structures. Nicole gave an applied example, showing how she had to work around these internal barriers:

*In local government, the way I managed it, I think I was a bit of an object of suspicion for quite a few of my managers; top heavy managers.*

To work around this management, she allied herself with a manager:

*They were* very open to new ideas and that was how I was able to work around a pretty conservative management structure that I had in community services and I was able to run those programs that I was talking about.

Charlie used a similar approach when attempting to incorporate environmental social work into the curriculum:

*I am trying to talk to the department of health which is responsible for social work education and say to them, you can’t do this, and finding allies. You know, good community work tactics, finding allies…who can put pressure on the authorities to change things.*

These social workers used creativity, openness, and allies to influence existing structures and produce actions of consequence. This is what Archer (1995) refers to as structural elaboration. This aligns with the critical realist ontology that states
structure precedes agency but can be transformative under the influence of human agency (Durkheim 1925).

Rita discussed the lack of funding available for environmental social work practice. As a result, Rita practices without pay:

This is my eco-social work practice [organising a community garden conference], it was all voluntary. I didn’t receive payment for this. I’m hoping that I will generate some work out of that.

This finding also appeared in Part A. This voluntary nature of the subfield has highlighted the overlap between the professional and personal, for example, Rita is practising with no payment, and instead, practising out of a passion for ecological justice and regeneration. In Rita’s own words:

I see the community garden network stuff that I’m doing, as a volunteer, because that’s the collapsing of the professional and personal.

This lends itself to another theme coming out of the data – the neoliberal critique. The majority of the participants emphasised the importance of challenging neoliberalism. Charlie said:

The only other thing that I didn’t mention, that I should mention is that you also need a critique of neoliberalism. And that is so fundamental because there has to be a critique of the way that capitalism uses the earth’s resources for the benefit of the few and meanwhile the many and the poorest end up carrying the can basically for all the things that go wrong. Green social work makes that very clear and I just wanted to reiterate it.

Working with individuals and communities only deals with the repercussions of neoliberalism, without addressing or challenging the overarching structure that fosters profit at the expense of the earth and climate. Rita expanded on this idea:
Humans have been so messed around by neoliberal ideologies and so conditioned – and I’m making it sound like they are passive and don’t have choices but when we create societies where it’s easier for people to be unsustainable than to be sustainable than the systems are the issue.

Relating this back to the theoretical frameworks, Bhasker (1975) and Archer (1995), similarly, do not consider agents as passive or devoid of choice. Structure predates agency but the analytical duality between structures and agents means agents can ‘consciously or unconsciously shape those social structures’ (Fletcher, 2017, p. 186). Neoliberalism is a causal mechanism that is influencing and shaping the way environmental social workers operate, for example, the voluntary nature of the subfield and the combining of personal and professional. Though, this should not be ‘denied in favour of overly structural (and therefore agency-stripping) discourses’ (Fletcher, 2017, p. 191). Particularly as these social workers are consciously attempting to alter these social structures by raising awareness, educating, finding allies, creating online programs, and volunteering.

A deep understanding of these barriers preventing practice can lead to insight into ways to mitigate them and correspondingly, promote environmental social work practice. Relating this back to Archer’s (1995) morphogenetic approach, understanding the causal factors means manipulating or steering the way it progresses. Moving forward, future research must pose the question: how can the subfield attenuate these barriers?

5.2.5 Bridging the gap between research and practice

This research is embedded in practice and aims to put forth recommendations that are applicable to practice. Therefore, the research project intended to understand – from practitioners – what is necessary to begin bridging the gap between research and practice.

Nicole, Rita and Charlie all said education and training was an important step to promoting practise. Although currently, the lack of environment social work education
is inhibiting practice, it has the potential to move the subfield forward. As Nicole put forth:

... if we change the curriculums around the country or the standards of practice and we bring them more strongly in line with the code of ethics then we will be able to build on our professional obligations in this space. And also, we will strengthen our understanding and create new avenues that we can practice in.

The creation of new avenues for environmental social workers may be a positive implication of increased education on this topic. For example, a deeper engagement with environmental social work in higher education has the potential to foster placement opportunities and give scope for social workers to apply for jobs in this field. Particularly, if they are trained with the necessary skills to practice. Narhi (cited in McKinnon 2013, p. 159) found that ‘social workers lacked confidence in negotiating good environmental outcomes for communities because they viewed themselves as lacking environmental expertise’. Social workers are not getting trained in this area and as a result, are lacking confidence. This finding shows a fundamental gap in practice that needs to be addressed, particularly as social workers ought to be the ‘links and advocates that connect the interest and needs of the population with the many bodies of power that influence development’ (Kennedy 2018, pp. 409-410). This is backed up by Miller and Hayward’s finding (2014), which found that social workers have a level of ‘environmental literacy’ no better than the average population. A potential way forward is to increase and promote interdisciplinary research and organisations, for example, creating teams or workplaces that have both social workers and ecologists working together. As social workers begin working along-side ecologists, they are able to pick up necessary skills, and vice versa. Moreover, if environmental education was implemented properly in curriculums; naturally, social workers will have more confidence in advocating and negotiating in this space. Hence why Nicole proposes that meaningful environmental social work education will be able to create new avenues.

Nicole and Rita talked positively about their involvement in various environmental social work practice groups they were a part of. Nicole, for example, said her group
consists of a ‘fantastic group of people’ that are able to routinely debrief and discuss their practice. Rita said:

_We had a sort of informal supervision with an eco-social work group… I’d meet with them and we would have conversations and talk. All of the critical reflection, all of the social work skills were being used in that. It was really eco-social work. It was really important to get… everyone together who is in that space…_

Consequently, practice groups appear to be an effective way to bring environmental social workers together and share ideas about practice. This may include covert practice, such as how social workers can better handle waste at their workplace. Or it could include overt practice, where members of the group can share how they are practicing, potentially giving other social workers ideas and creating new streams of practice. Nicole and Rita said these groups have been effective for their own practice, which shows fostering connections between environmental social workers holds great potential for enhancing practice. Furthermore, practice groups may benefit by having individuals from a variety of disciplines contribute, most importantly, those with relevant ecological training that social workers are lacking.

Jones (2010) and Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2012) reason that in order to meaningfully respond to the ecological crisis, we need to fundamentally rethink social works positioning; this requires a paradigm shift. Thomas Kuhn (1996) in his book _The Structure of Scientific Revolution_ broke new ground with his notion of the paradigm shift. A useful way of thinking about Kuhn’s (1996) transition between paradigm phases is through the metaphor of making a tea. The pre-paradigm phase signifies water sitting in a kettle and researchers working within this framework. This is the phase in the 1980’s where environmental social work was not on the agenda of the profession. The kettle is metaphoric for Kuhn’s idea of ‘normal science’ as research is based on the rules and standards for scientific practice that can operate within the parameters of the kettle. For example, the person-in-environment was the leading framework that meant the parameters were not inclusive of the natural environment. At a certain point, a bubble (problem) rises to the surface. Drawing out the metaphor, that is the recognition and awareness that social workers should be
responding to environmental issues and the clear overlap between wellbeing and environment. Soon several bubbles (problems) gradually begin to surface in the kettle; this is the problems manifesting and the environmental social work literature expanding. When the water hits the boiling point, the water is poured out of the kettle into a completely different setting which symbolically represents Kuhn’s paradigm shift. That is to say, there is a reimagining of social work whereby the rules and parameters are changed. A paradigm shift that is inclusive of environmental social work value base would be ‘drastic and transformative’ (Jones 2018, p. 558).

Environmental social work challenges the traditional, human-centric, and modernist foundations. Thus, the paradigm shift means ‘moving away from social work’s traditional ontological and epistemological foundations’ (Boetto, cited in Jones 2018, p. 652). Rita and Nicole’s comments overlap with Jones’ (2018) case for a paradigm shift. As Rita states:

…I think eventually – this is my big plan – eco will shrivel off because everyone’s doing it. If you’re not doing eco-social work than you are actually contributing to the problem of unsustainability and that’s not a judgment because people are in that dualism and they are still very disconnected from those natural systems.

Nipperess and Boddy (2018, p. 554) endorse this paradigm shift and state that environmental social work needs to become ‘mainstream social work practice, where social and environmental justice’ are embedded and central to the profession. Kuhn (1996) poses the question, once a paradigm shift has taken place, what further problems does it leave the unified group to resolve? This is what Kuhn (1996, p. 24) refers to as ‘mopping up’. However, environmental social work is not yet embedded in everyday practice, meaning there is still a great deal more understanding and implementation required before a paradigm shift is achieved.

Similarly, Nicole argued that she would like to see environmental social work entrenched and a part of everyday practice. Nicole put forth a way to do this – through continuing professional development (CPD). CPD is the ‘process through which social workers maintain, improve and broaden their skills, knowledge and expertise’ (AASW n.d, para. 1). Halton, Powell and Scanlon (2014) in a national
study found CPD was overwhelmingly positive for social workers in their practice. CPD provides a valuable space for social workers to learn, reflect, think and act (Halton, Powell & Scanlon 2014). Thus, as Nicole puts forth above, the inclusion of environmental social work practice in CPD has the potential to increase awareness and application, particularly for covert practice. In Nicole’s words:

_I would love to see a requirement of a certain of CPD [continuing professional development] hours per year must be used in environmental social work, that would be fantastic. I think that then would have a flow-on effect because you would have these professionals in hospitals and family violence services, schools, local government and all the places social workers practice and we would have a professional responsibility to work in those ways as environmental practitioners and that would then have the flow on effect to challenge the barriers that are there for us in services._

Nicole expounded on professional responsibility:

_I feel like we don’t have a lot of professional autonomy as practitioners and I think the relative lack of professional advocacy of social workers in the environmental space is a follow on from that. I’ll give you a comparison with doctors. There are doctors for the environment; they are very active. There is climate and health alliance that does a lot of work. So, that’s one sort of comparative group… I think that social workers do have avenues to be involved but I think there are a lot of barriers._

The body of environmental social work literature has begun the process of a paradigm shift, but there is still an ambiguity about the practical application (Miller & Hayward 2014). There is a level of uncertainty about where exactly environmental social workers should be practising (Miller & Hayward 2014; Ramsay & Boddy 2017). This was evident in Miller and Haywards (2014) research, which analysed the perception of environmental social work from students in the United States. The results showed that students did not have a clear sense of environmental social work practice and how to ‘incorporate these practices into their professional career’ (Miller
& Hayward 2014, p. 289). Nicole addresses this and points out different settings environmental social workers should be involved in:

*I can think of a whole lot of settings… I think we should be practising in the health space… that could do with a social work approach. You could go into one school and try to turn it around where all the kids and the families agreed to a certain way of doing things for a period and see how everything went.*

*… [G]oing into houses with dangerous heating systems and asbestos cracked and exposed, air pollution problems from factories… and be stronger advocates.*

*I think that hospital social workers could play an active role in trying to make the food services more sustainable and nutritious and have an environmental lens with patients.*

This lack of professional autonomy, education, and engagement from governing bodies has pushed environmental social work to the margins. To bring about social change, Rita wants to combine her online skills with environmental social work education to create an online course. Rita believes that ‘people will do it [environmental social work] if they knew how to’. With universities largely failing to teach environmental social work, Rita is looking to fill the important void. Charlie reiterated the importance of education and training:

*… social workers have to intervene in disaster situations and they never have even a minute of training on what to do. We found out through the Grenfell disaster, that they [social workers] get stressed out because they go there and use generic skills like intervening people, identifying needs, and then crisis intervention but once that stops, they haven’t a clue about what else to do. So, I don’t think that’s good enough…*

Thus, showing that social workers are not being given the practical skills for working in environmental disasters, such skills as capacity building and reconstruction. Charlie also noted that, in order to begin bridging this gap, there needs to be ‘a lot
more research on what is needed’ – referring to both the practical skills social workers require and where social workers need to be. This raises pertinent questions for future research – as practice is scarce on the ground, where should social workers be and what are the best means of promoting practice? These participants have provided indispensable data to begin the process of shifting research into practice.
Chapter 6: Implications for the Social Work Profession

This research has clear implications for both the subfield of environmental social work and the profession more broadly. Firstly, the research used Ramsay & Boddy’s (2017, p. 82) definition of environmental social which ‘…in essence a social worker who is assisting humanity to create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem’. However, this was used as an inductive definition and the research maintained that the understanding of environmental social work should come from those practising. The practitioners understanding of environmental social largely overlapped with Ramsay & Boddy’s (2017) definition. A slight dissimilarity was that Ramsay & Boddy (2017) definition focuses on ‘assisting humanity’, however many of the practitioners mentioned the need for social work lens to extend beyond the anthropocentric focus and extend rights to the non-human world. Moreover, an analysis of the data set showed environmental social work can be taxonomized into two practices: covert and overt. The differences between covert and overt practice and based on setting and purpose. Covert practice refers to the incorporating of environmental actions into social services or healthcare settings where the primary focus is not based on the environment. For example, social workers who utilise walking meetings in a child protection agency. Whereas overt refers to social work practice that primarily focuses on promoting biodiversity and regeneration or assisting humans to connect with ecology. For example, a community garden.

This investigation into the application of environmental social work in NSW found that the pragmatic application is rare. Social work is valuable for its practice validity and grassroots work (Sheppard 1998; Dominelli 2018), but it is evident that environmental social work is not yet established as a legitimate practice. This is despite the theoretical base being strong, and environmental social work publications continuing to increase (Ramsay & Boddy 2016). This investigation reveals incongruence between the research and what is occurring on the ground. If the profession wants to remain relevant and contribute meaningfully, it needs to widen its scope to the pragmatic application of environmental social work and ‘adapt to the realities of the contemporary world’ (Kennedy 2018, p. 418).
Despite practice being rare, a deeper investigation revealed this was not the only factor affecting the low response rate in this research. There was a high number of participants screened out for not being a qualified social worker which indicates that people may be practising environmental social work without an accreditation or with a related degree. This is not a rare phenomenon in social work (see Brown et al. 2013). Moreover, this research project made the novel finding that there is a problem of identification among the subfield. This was confirmed by both the survey and the interviews. Half the participants who took part in the survey stated they did not identify as an environmental social worker. All participants in the interviews identified as an environmental social worker, but stated identification in the field was a problem. Participants believed this was often due to a lack of awareness, which was represented in the survey results. The mobilisation of the subfield is desirable as bringing together practitioners can foster interconnected thinking and shared knowledge. This also applies to interdisciplinary practice, for example, teams combining social workers, ecologists, and economists can result in the sharing of expertise and skills, and thus be more effective in achieving a shared vision. If the mobilisation of environmental social work does transpire, future research will be able to gain a deeper understanding of practice as there will not be problems of identification. This mobilisation is a natural next step in the process of addressing the ultimate aim of environmental justice and regeneration. This is familiar ground for social work as resource and service mobilisation, along with collective empowerment, is embedded in the professions value base and practice (Sjöberg, Rambaree & Jojo 2015; AASW 2016).

An implication of the evidence from the data set was the necessity of environmental social work directed education. This is by no means a new finding (see Jones 2013; Hayward, Miller & Shaw 2013; Nesmith & Smyth 2015; Harris & Boddy 2017). However, this research offers guidance about what types of education the practitioners who participated value in order to work effectively. The practitioners stated that their existing social work skills have been useful for their role, but they had little to moderate ecological literacy (figure 4). The most useful of the existing social work skills was the proficiency of their communication. Other overlapping skills from the participants included online literacy skills, critical reflection, community
development skills, ability to engage and negotiate, aptitude at working across interdisciplinary teams, organisation, and crisis intervention skills. Research skills were also acknowledged, which is expected given the high portion of social work academics that participated in the survey. Emerging from the data was the notion that social work skills were often not enough in their practice. Therefore, two objectives to improve education are put forth. Firstly, the data shows that social work curriculums need to include a higher level of ecological training. Secondly, environmental social work education has to provide practical ways to apply environmental social work. Currently, the participants have been working around barriers and creatively finding ways to incorporate practice in spite of these barriers. Hence why practical tools are necessary for education. Jones (2018) provides a valuable pedagogical platform to incorporate these two objectives, that is, through transformative learning and Education for Sustainability.

If environmental social work education is meaningfully implemented, there are numerous benefits. For instance, a higher degree of ecological literacy will boost confidence. This is pertinent given Narhi (cited in McKinnon 2013, p. 159) found social workers lacked confidence when negotiating positive environmental outcomes. Confidence was not an area that arose in this research project. Nonetheless, this provides exciting opportunities for future research. For example, universities that did incorporate environmental social work frameworks could consider if graduates were better prepared and confident. This could also be measured quantitatively through questions such as: ‘did these graduates place a larger focus on environmental outcomes in their study and post-graduate work?’

Education has the potential to increase students’ awareness of environmental social work which could help resolve the problem of identification among the subfield. As a result, students could be made more aware of what environmental social work is and how they can practice. Thus, a by-product of education is the valuable pathway it provides towards mobilising the subfield. Furthermore, education has the potential to increase the practice of environmental social work itself. This will require empirical investigation, but there is the possibility that graduates who are more aware of environmental social work may seek overt practice. Additionally, social workers who
move into social services may be more inclined to introduce covert practices such as recycling or walking meetings.

Field placements hold potential for mobilisation and an increased prevalence of practice. The benefits are two-fold, firstly, students are shown that environmental social work is a legitimate area of practice and they are able to apply and refine their skills. Secondly, environmental field education may show non-traditional social work services where environmental social work practitioners provide valuable and appropriate skills. In turn, this has the potential to create more environmental social work avenues, which are necessary for bridging the divide between research and practice.

Participants urged for a paradigm shift whereby environmental social work is embedded in the profession’s ethos. This is in alignment with much of the literature (Coates 2003; Jones 2010; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington 2012; Ramsay & Boddy 2016; Dominelli 2018). The implications of a paradigm shift, as understood by the participants’ responses is, a change in values, education, theory, research, and practice. This means shifting to a paradigm that recognises the connection between humans and nature and acts in accordance with promoting biodiversity. The participants gave practical methods that they have used in their own practice; these methods can be applied more broadly. Firstly, two participants were a part of an environmental social work practice group. The participants said this has been useful for sharing ideas and skills. Connecting environmental social workers with other practitioners and academics has the potential to improve practice. Again, deeper investigations into the effectiveness of these groups are necessary but this study shows promising results.

Another vehicle to drive this paradigm shift is through continuing professional development. The preceding suggestions largely focus on higher education, but continuing professional development offers an opportunity to connect with practitioners who are already in the field. The AASW (2010) have expanded their scope to be more inclusive of the environment and the code of ethics is representative of this. Still, there is no evidence that this inclusivity is having direct manifestations (Bowles et al. 2018). Embedding environmental social work theory
and practice skills in continuing professional development goals are a direct way of connecting with practitioners. If members of the AASW complete their continual professional development goals, they are eligible for formal accreditation. This shows that governing bodies such as the AASW have the platform to increase environmental social work awareness and practice through CPD. This has the potential to increase covert practice; for example, social workers may be more inclined to counsel outdoors, take walking meetings, or introduce recycling/waste management. This paradigm shift includes rethinking one of social work’s core value: human rights. A large portion of the participants discussed the need for social work to be inclusive of the non-human world. This is in alignment with the emerging body of literature (Gray & Coates 2011; Ife 2016; Ryan 2016; Dominelli 2018). A small number of the participants have begun incorporating this into their own practice.

As illustrated in table 2 (characteristics of practice), this research project has shown that environmental social work practice is diverse in action. Coates, Gray and Hetherington (2006) offer insightful wisdom when discussing the diversity of social work. Coates, Gray and Hetherington (2006) argue that the binaries that have often been used are not beneficial (i.e. community or clinical practitioner). Such dichotomies and debates in social work have driven polarisation. This makes it essential to listen and foster dialogue at all levels; this means continuing to talk with social workers, individuals and communities, and thenceforth, find means by which to encourage empowerment and environmental regeneration.

More research is needed to investigate the pragmatic application of environmental social work. Particularly given the scarce application and identification in NSW. Instead of seeking participants who identify with the label, future research can discuss with practitioners if and how they are implementing environmental social work tools. This will shed more light on the realities of practice and the problem of identification. Nipperess and Boddy (2018) argue there needs to be more research evaluating environmental social work practice initiatives. Part A of this research tried to locate these initiatives with minimal success. Thus, when such initiatives are found, it is important to analyse and evaluate their effectiveness. This provides insight into where and how they can be replicated.
After applying a thematic analysis, there were three key barriers inhibiting practising: education, organisations, and income generation. Although currently a barrier, social work education, if introduced effectively, has immense potential to promote the subfield. A framework to do so has been outlined above. Secondly, for the large part, participants said organisations and upper to middle-management have hindered or discouraged their environmental social work practice. The discouragement of practice from organisations indicates that there is a lack of formal recognition, which can have negative implications for both practice and policy as the subfield may be interpreted as lacking credibility or legitimacy. This is particularly troubling considering organisations lay the foundation for practice. The AASW (2013) have begun incorporating environmentalism into the profession's value base, however, this needs to funnel down to organisations. Continuing professional development and education offers avenues to do so.

This links into how participants have brought together their professional and personal lives, which was a finding documented by McKinnon (2013). Similar to McKinnon’s (2013) study, participants expressed powerlessness and being faced with many barriers preventing them from incorporating their personal environmentalism into their professional practice. Unfortunately, there is ‘sharp divide’ and pro-environmental actions are not yet accepted or promoted (McKinnon 2013, p. 164). This study reinforced this notion, though the participants of this study have been collapsing the two, in spite of the barriers. Participants were raising awareness, creating tools, educating, finding allies, and volunteering.

This collapsing of the professional and personal has resulted in a volunteer-heavy subfield. Although the professionalisation has distanced social work from the volunteer sector, the two have historically overlapped and to varying degrees, still, continue to do so (Brozmanová & Stachoň 2014). As Sherr (2008) points out, social work began as a group of hard-working volunteers. Recall that two practitioners in this study are receiving no payment for their environmental social work practice. Environmental social work is not yet established, nor embedded in the profession, which has pushed accredited social workers to become volunteers in order to practice. This has an important implication, namely, social services and
organisations need to be inclusive of environmental practice in order to promote environmental social work practice.

The incorporation of Indigenous lenses was largely absent from the data. The importance of Indigenous lenses and their incorporation into practice was only mentioned by one participant, despite this being a key part of the environmental social work literature. It is imperative to promote Indigenous knowledge, particularly within Australia given the sophisticated ecological management, conservation, and farming used by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples (Pascoe 2014). Additionally, discussion on evidence-based practice was scarcely mentioned. Evidence-based practice underpins social work as it ‘integrates sources of knowledge’ in order to improve practice efficacy (Drisko & Grady 2015). Environmental social work has a unique opportunity to combine these two models. Thus, moving forward, the subfield needs to look to apply Indigenous knowledges and evidence-based practice, to ensure systematic credibility.

In summary, for environmental social work to progress – based on this research project and the broader literature – it is argued that:

1. More research is needed to continue understanding the practical realities of environmental social work
2. Environmental social work education should be implemented, with an emphasis on improving ecological literacy and providing direct practice approaches
3. It is necessary to promote interdisciplinary research and workplaces
4. There should be online and physical spaces for environmental social workers to connect with each other
5. Continuing professional development plans ought to include environmental social work training
6. The value base ought to extend to include the non-human world
7. There is a need to evaluate existing environmental social work initiatives
8. Environmental social work field education presents opportunities to train students, as well as create new job avenues
9. It is essential to conduct more research into the barriers preventing practice and how to mitigate them.

10. Organisations and social services need to be open to including environmental social work practice.

11. It is necessary to promote the nexus between the evidence-based paradigm and Indigenous ways of knowing.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

As we enter the age of the Anthropocene, we are increasingly being confronted by the reality of climate change and the severe ramifications of the harvest our species has sown. These consequences carry social implications, highlighting the social work professions duty to take part in shaping contemporary responses to socio-environmental challenges. Current social work literature acknowledges this; however, it lacks exploration and analysis of the practical realities. This research project directly addressed this gap by exploring the pragmatic application of environmental social work within NSW.

Firstly, Part A of research project found a limited number of social workers were practising environmental social work in NSW. This negative result shows there is a discrepancy between the continually growing theoretical base and what is occurring in practice. Secondly, half of the participants did not identify with the term. This is indicative that there are more environmental social workers practising in NSW, but due to the lack of awareness and identification, they were not located. Moreover, the majority of the survey participants were academics, reiterating that while social work is developing theoretically, it is failing to translate into practice. Thus, it is imperative for future research to focus on the real-world applications, the translation of theory into practice, and ways to promote the mobilisation of the subfield.

The three in-depth interviews explored and unpacked the data gathered in Part A, but also focussed on their wide-ranging experience of practising environmental social work. The data from the survey heavily overlapped with the experiences of the interviewees, namely that practice is scarce and many practitioners are not identifying with the term. Using a thematic analysis, barriers inhibiting practice were identified, notably the lack of environmental social work education, the difficulty in generating an income, and discouragement from organisations. Recognising this is of paramount importance and a clear indicator that governing bodies and researchers alike should focus on alleviating these barriers and promoting practice.
More research needs to explore how the profession can better support social workers to be more responsive to environmental needs and issues.

The research highlighted the need for a professional paradigm shift. Firstly, this requires a change in values which includes an embedment of the relationship between the environment and wellbeing, along with the rethinking of human rights, towards values that are inclusive of the non-human world. Secondly, a paradigm shift constitutes the transformation of the current social work education. This research highlights the need to improve ecological literacy among social work students and practitioners. Lastly, a paradigm shift requires practical knowledge and application. If the profession continues to remain heavily theoretical, it risks losing its relevance for the rhetorical commitment without actualisation.

It is historically beyond the academic silos where social work has been such an important and practical profession. Therefore, the future of environmental social work needs to be entrenched in practice. This research initiated the first, of what needs to be a methodical investigation into the pragmatic application of environmental social work. The research is an indispensable contribution to the slowly developing field of environmental social work as it provides important data on the current state of practice in NSW but furthermore, provides a guide for social work researchers to investigate in other locations.

It is imperative to create sturdy structures in society to reduce the velocity of climate change and advocate for and support communities and individuals affected by the ramifications. Whilst it is a cause that would benefit from a unified approach and every individual’s efforts, it is a realm that would particularly benefit from social workers involvement. The social work profession cannot afford to remain on the margins in addressing climate change and environmental degradation; neither for the sake of the profession, nor for the sake of the earth. If the profession continues to do so, it neglects its ethical responsibilities and loses vital opportunities to participate in shaping contemporary responses to environmental challenges.
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Appendix

Appendix A: Human Ethics Approval Letter

Appendix B: Human Ethics Amendment Letter

Appendix C: Human Ethics Amendment Letter (2)

Appendix D: Participant Information Sheet (Part A – Survey)

Appendix E: Participant Information Sheet (Part B – Interview)

Appendix F: Survey Questions

Appendix G: Interview Questions
Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia
Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI)

REDI Reference: H12586
Risk Rating: Low 1 - LNR

A.

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

12 March 2018

Doctor Neil Hall
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Neil,

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your research proposal H12586 “Mapping the Pragmatic Application of Environmental Social Work within Sydney”, until 12 March 2019 with the provision of a progress report annually if over 12 months and a final report on completion.

In providing this approval the HREC determined that the proposal meets the requirements of the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

This protocol covers the following researchers:

Neil Hall, Jim Ife, Chris Panagiotaros

Conditions of Approval

1. A progress report will be due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.

2. A final report will be due at the expiration of the approval period.

3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee prior to being implemented. Amendments must be requested using the HREC Amendment Request Form: https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/word_doc/0012/1096995/FORM_Amendment_Request.docx

4. Any serious or unexpected adverse events on participants must be reported to the Human Research Ethics Committee via the Human Ethics Officer as a matter of priority.

5. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the Committee as a matter of priority.

6. Consent forms are to be retained within the archives of the School or Research Institute and made available to the Committee upon request.

7. Project specific conditions:

Please quote the registration number and title as indicated above in the subject line of all future correspondence related to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the e-mail address humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au (the e-mail address is strictly monitored.

Yours sincerely

Professor Elizabeth Deane
Presiding Member,
Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee
HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

14 March 2018

Doctor Neil Hall
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Neil,

RE: Amendment Request to H12586

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your request to amend your approved research protocol H12586 “Mapping the Pragmatic Application of Environmental Social Work within Sydney.”

The approved amendments are:

Extend geographical location for recruitment to all of NSW.

Project specific approval conditions:
There are no specific conditions applicable.

Please quote the registration number and title as indicated above in the subject line on all future correspondence relating to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the above address humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au as this e-mail address is closely monitored.

Regards

Professor Elizabeth Deane
Presiding Member,
Human Researcher Ethics Committee
Western Sydney University
C.

Locked Bag 1797
Penrith NSW 2751 Australia
Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI)

REDI Reference: H12586
Expiry Date: 12 March 2019

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE

6 June 2018

Doctor Neil Hall
School of Social Sciences and Psychology

Dear Neil,

RE: Amendment Request to H12586

I wish to formally advise you that the Human Research Ethics Committee has approved your request to amend your approved research protocol H12586 “Mapping the Pragmatic Application of Environmental Social Work within Sydney”.

The approved amendments are:

Addition of three qualitative interviews

Interview questions

New information sheet and consent form

Recruitment email texts

Project specific approval conditions:
There are no specific conditions applicable.

Please quote the registration number and date as indicated above in the subject line on all further correspondence related to this project. All correspondence should be sent to the e-mail address: humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au as this e-mail address is closely monitored.

Regards

[Signature]

Professor Elizabeth Deane

Presiding Member,
Human Researcher Ethics Committee
Western Sydney University
Project Title: Mapping the Pragmatic Application of Environmental Social Work within Sydney

Project Summary: Climate change is already having a major effect on the global ecosystem, and the consequences are predicted to become increasingly severe in coming decades. The subfield of environmental social work that analyses these consequences remains heavily underexplored. This project aims to address the research gap by using an online survey to examine how environmental social work is being practised in the field. The research will identify, map and analyse social workers whose work revolves around responses to environmental issues or promoting ecological justice. The research is aiming to gain a deeper understanding of environmental social work – wanting to know how, where, and to what degree it is being practised. This mapping will provide important evidence to identify, strengthen, and advise future practice in the field.

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Chris Panagiotaros, Master of Research Student at Western Sydney University (School of Social Sciences), under the Supervision of Neil Hall (Academic Course Advisor at Western Sydney University) and Jim Ife (Professor of Social Work at Western Sydney University).

How is the study being paid for?
The research is not funded. The research is conducted under the Master of Research course at Western Sydney University.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to complete an online survey in relation to your role as an environmental social worker. You will be asked a sequence of open, closed, and Linkert scale questions.

Please be aware that this survey takes confidentiality extremely serious, where all participants will remain entirely anonymous. Questions surrounding your workplace are necessary for the process of mapping, however, measures including encryption will be put in place to ensure participants are not identifiable.

The data gathered will be used solely for this research project, however, if further research does take place, an option will be available for you to provide contact details (name, number, and email). This is optional, and available if you would be interested or willing to participate in further research on environmental social work. This contactable information will not, in any way, be used for this research project.

How much of my time will I need to give?
Approximately 20-25 minutes.

What benefits will I, and/or the broader community, receive for participating?
By engaging in this study, you will benefit from contributing to the research base that positively enhances how social workers can respond to environmental issues. An understanding of environmental social is fundamental to advocating, strengthening, and advising future practice. The study is the first of its kind, which means, it is able to provide a guide for other social workers to do mapping in other locations, therefore, is able to benefit the broader community. The current and future projects it may inform hope to provide a level of insight that could provide a beneficial contribution to the discussion of environmental social work and the positive development of services within the field.
On a macro sense, social work is one arm that needs to begin effectively responding to climate change. Responding and mitigating climate change is imperative to benefiting all life on earth.

**Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for me? If so, what will be done to rectify it?**
It is unlikely that the survey will cause any distress or discomfort. However, in the event that you do experience distress after participating in the survey, there are a range of support services available in your local area. Locally based support services are available via [http://au.reachout.com/](http://au.reachout.com/), [https://www.beyondblue.org.au/](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/), [http://headspace.org.au/](http://headspace.org.au/), or through your workplace support services.

**How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results?**
The thesis will be submitted for grading, but there is no intention of publishing the data for unrelated research, non-research purposes or other possible uses. If any publication and/or presentation may arise, the information will be provided in such a way that the participant cannot be identified. The information will be decoded.

As the research engages in a mapping exercise, measures are put in place to ensure that the participants workplace is not identifiable. The research will not pinpoint the exact location but rather, map to the area. For example, if eight environmental social workers were located within the Blue Mountains region. The map would not reveal the exact location of the workplace but map these social workers collectively in the Blue Mountains.

**Will the data and information that I have provided be disposed of?**
Please be assured that only the researchers will have access to the raw data you provide. Parts of the data will be presented in the thesis paper and stored for up to five years before it is destroyed. All data will remain de-identified throughout this period. If contactable information is provided for further research, the details will be securely stored and locked on a hard-drive. If further research does not take place within five years, the contactable information will also be destroyed.

**Can I withdraw from the study?**
Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate you can withdraw at any time without giving reason.

**Can I tell other people about the study?**
Yes, if you think there are other relevant participants, please provide them with the online survey link.

**What if I require further information?**
Please contact Chris should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

Email: [c.panagiotaros@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:c.panagiotaros@westernsydney.edu.au)

**What if I have a complaint?**
If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email [humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au).

Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

There is potential for future research to take place on Environmental Social Work. For those interested in participating in future research, please send an email to [c.panagiotaros@westernsydney.edu.au](mailto:c.panagiotaros@westernsydney.edu.au) with your contact details (name, email, and phone number).

By continuing with the survey, you are implying consent to anonymously participate in the survey, and for your responses to be used in the research project.

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H12586.
Project Title: Mapping the Pragmatic Application of Environmental Social Work within New South Wales

Project Summary: Climate change is already having a major effect on the global ecosystem, and the consequences are predicted to become increasingly severe in coming decades. The subfield of environmental social work that analyses these consequences remains heavily underexplored. This project aims to address the research gap by using an online survey to examine how environmental social work is being practised in the field. The research will identify, map and analyse social workers whose work revolves around responses to environmental issues or promoting ecological justice. The research is aiming to gain a deeper understanding of environmental social work – wanting to know how, where, and to what degree it is being practised. This mapping will provide important evidence to identify, strengthen, and advise future practice in the field.

You are invited to participate in a research study being conducted by Chris Panagiotaros, Master of Research Student at Western Sydney University (School of Social Sciences), under the Supervision of Neil Hall (Academic Course Advisor at Western Sydney University) and Jim Ife (Professor of Social Work at Western Sydney University).

How is the study being paid for?
The research is not funded. The research is conducted under the Master of Research course at Western Sydney University.

What will I be asked to do?
You will be asked to a series of questions in relation to your role as an environmental social worker and your knowledge of the subfield.

Please be aware that the researchers take confidentiality extremely serious, where any identifiable information will be excluded – including references to specific places and persons. Measures including encryption will be put in place to ensure participants are not identifiable. The data gathered will be used solely for this research project.

How much of my time will I need to give?
Approximately 20-25 minutes.

What benefits will I, and/or the broader community, receive for participating?
By engaging in this study, you will benefit from contributing to the research base that positively enhances how social workers can respond to environmental issues. An understanding of environmental social is fundamental to advocating, strengthening, and advising future practice. The study is the first of its kind, which means, it is able to provide a guide for other social workers to do mapping in other locations, therefore, is able to benefit the broader community. The current and future projects it may inform hope to provide a level of insight that could provide a beneficial contribution to the discussion of environmental social work and the positive development of services within the field. On a macro sense, social work is one arm that needs to begin effectively responding to climate change. Responding and mitigating climate change is imperative to benefiting all life on earth.

Will the study involve any risk or discomfort for me? If so, what will be done to rectify it?
It is unlikely that the interview will cause any distress or discomfort. However, in the event that you do experience distress after participating in the interview, there are a range of support services available in your local area. Locally based support services are available via http://au.reachout.com/, https://www.beyondblue.org.au/, http://headspace.org.au/, or through your workplace support services.

**How do you intend to publish or disseminate the results?**
The thesis will be submitted for grading, but there is no intention of publishing the data for unrelated research, non-research purposes or other possible uses. If any publication and/or presentation may arise, the information will be provided in such a way that the participant cannot be identified. The information will be decoded.

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**Can I withdraw from the study?**
Participation is entirely voluntary, and you are not obliged to be involved. If you do participate you can withdraw at any time without giving reason.

**Can I tell other people about the study?**
Yes, if you think there are other relevant participants for the survey section of the research, please provide them with the online survey link.

**What if I require further information?**
Please contact Chris should you wish to discuss the research further before deciding whether or not to participate.

Email: c.panagiotaros@westernsydney.edu.au

**What if I have a complaint?**
If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee through Research Engagement, Development and Innovation (REDI) on Tel +61 2 4736 0229 or email humanethics@westernsydney.edu.au. Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.

Please ensure you have read and signed the consent form before proceeding with the interview.

This study has been approved by the Western Sydney University Human Research Ethics Committee. The Approval number is H12586.
F.

The survey was generated and distributed via the survey program, Qualtrics.

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Q1. Are you a qualified social worker?
   - Yes
   - No*

* We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

Q2. Are you currently working in New South Wales?
   - Yes
   - No*

* We thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.

Q3. What year did you graduate from University?
   - 2010 - Present
   - 2000 - 2009
   - 1990 - 1999
   - 1980 - 1989
   - 1970 - 1979
   - 1969 - 1960
   - 1959 - Prior
Q4. Does your work as an environmental social worker:

☐ Promote ecological justice and sustainability
☐ Respond to the repercussions of ecological disaster
☐ Focus on improving non-human life
☐ Improve the health and well-being of clients by incorporating the natural environment into practice
☐ Other (Please explain the central aim of your work as an Environmental Social Worker):

______________________________________________________________________________

Q5. Do you identify as an environmental social worker?

☐ Yes*
☐ No*

*If yes is selected, participants are directed to question 7.

*If no is selected, participants are directed to question 6.

Q6. Why do you not identify as an environmental social worker?

______________________________________________________________________________

Q7. Why do you identify as an environmental social worker?

______________________________________________________________________________

Q8. What is the postcode of your workplace?

______________________________________________________________________________
Q9. What type of organisation do you work for?

- Disaster Relief
- Non-Governmental Environmental Organisation
- Environmental Public Policy
- Community Development Organisation
- Climate Refugee Based Organisation
- Activist Organisation
- Other (Please Specify):

Q10. How well informed were you about ecology and the environment prior to getting your job?

Not at all | Well informed
---|---
0 | 10
1 | 9
2 | 8
3 | 7
4 | 6
5 | 5
6 | 4
7 | 3
8 | 2
9 | 1

Q11. What responsibilities and duties are involved in your work?

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

Q12. On a scale from 0-10, how useful have your social work skills and tools been for your role?

Not at all | Very useful
---|---
0 | 10
1 | 9
2 | 8
3 | 7
4 | 6
5 | 5
6 | 4
7 | 3
8 | 2
9 | 1

Q13 What social work skills and tools have been the most useful for your role?

________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________________

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Q14. There is potential for future research to take place on Environmental Social Work. Would you be interested in participating?

- Yes*
- No*

* If yes is selected, participants are directed to a separate survey where they provide their name, email, and phone number.

* If no is selected: ‘we thank you for your time spent taking this survey. Your response has been recorded.’
G.

1. What is your understanding of environmental social work?

2. How have you been practising environmental social work?

3. What are the key social work tools and skills useful in your practice?

4. My research has found that there are few environmental social workers practising in NSW. The literature emphasises the importance of the subfield, but this does not seem to be playing out on the ground – does your knowledge and your experience support these research findings? If so, how?

5. What strategies do you think are necessary to begin bridging the gap between research and practice?