# A Deeper, More Social Ecological Social Work Practice

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Although an ecological model of social work practice has been important to the profession since the 1970s, advances in ecological theory based on developments in deep ecology (Naess 1989) and social ecology (Bookchin 1980, 1982) inform a significantly different understanding of ecological theory on which to base an emerging practice. Earlier conceptualizations of ecology in social work, synonymous with mechanistic systems models, differ from the more mutualistic, nonhierarchical, and emancipatory use of ecological principles found in this new ecology. Eight principles are explored for their applicability to the practice of social work.

Although ecological social work practice has been an integral part of the profession's practice orientation since the 1970s, developments in deep ecology (Naess 1989) and social ecology (Bookchin 1980, 1982) offer social workers increasingly progressive theories on which to base an ecological practice. These developments are similar to critical, feminist, and postmodern developments taking place in the profession, which themselves reflect an evolving understanding of the person-in-environment and the dynamics of power inherent in transactional processes (Chambon and Irving 1994; Van Den Bergh 1995; Ife 1997; Leonard 1997). Earlier conceptualizations of ecology in social work, synonymous with mechanistic systems models (see Auerswald 1968; Germain 1978, 1981; Meyer 1983), differ significantly from the more mutualistic, nonhierarchical, and emancipatory use of ecological principles discussed in this article.

## Ecological Perspectives in Social Work

The term "ecology" was first used by Ernst Haeckel in 1868 to refer to interdependencies among organisms in the natural world. In conventional usage, ecology means "the interdisciplinary scientific study of the living conditions of organisms in interaction with each other and with the surroundings, organic as well as inorganic" (Naess 1989, p. 36). There is a comfortable fit between the science of ecology and a profession like social work, which has as its expressed purpose fostering healthy and interdependent transactions between persons and their environments. The earliest ecological model of social work practice challenged the individualistic casework orientation popular in the early and middle twentieth century (Ramsay 1994; Wakefield 1996b). As Carol Meyer notes, "The movement from casework to social work was more than semantic; it meant ultimately that family, group, community, and organizational approaches to intervention were to be included under the heading of social work practice, and that new efforts were to be made to intervene in the client's environment" (1983, p. 12).

In an early review of ecological theory, Geoffrey Greif and Arthur Lynch (1983) trace social workers' understanding of ecology to biological theories that explain adaptation of organisms to their environments. In human terms, this means that "as a person enters each new situation, he or she usually adapts to its demands and, by his or her presence, changes the situation at least structurally. A person is constantly creating, restructuring, and adapting to the environment even as the environment affects the person" (Greif and Lynch 1983, p. 38). Although these early formulations emphasize goodness of fit through adaptation, they practically ignore the position of the observer (social worker) vis-à-vis the client and the relative power of each part of the helping system. Early ecological models were based on systems theories that built on the works of Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) and Gregory Bateson (1972) and were most commonly used by social workers to explain the interactional processes between family members. These systems-based models of practice, as developed by social workers such as Salvador Minuchin (1974), did not deconstruct the standpoints of those who decide which adaptations are determined to be the best. Implicit in these early models is the naive assumption that all family members benefit equally from a system that establishes balance in ways amenable to those in power (Luepnitz 1988).

Despite these shortcomings in systems theory, social workers still found an ecological perspective, based on a broadened view of systems theory, intriguing and more synchronous with their mission than the individualizing psychoanalytic models of intervention popular in the 1950s and 1960s. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, Edgar Auerswald (1968) was pioneering efforts to integrate ecology and general systems theory in social work, and the field of ecosystems and ecological practice gained ground.

As ideas evolved, ecological theory came to refer specifically to transactional processes, not to the individual components of either the person or environment in a system (Woodrow 1983). Models proliferated, including Carel Germain and Alex Gitterman's (1980) life model, Meyer's ecosystems model (1983), and Minuchin's (1974) structural family therapy. Such convergence of thought and an explicit emphasis by authors to provide guiding theory rather than prescriptions for practice led Greif and Lynch (1983) to observe that social work was at the time moving steadily away from "a fragmented view of practice based on method derived from setting" (p. 54), which typified earlier developments in the profession. Although its adherents saw systems-based ecological models of practice as a positive step, Jerome Wakefield (1996a) argues that such detachment from practice made ecological theory redundant to social work because, being an applied discipline, the profession still had to rely on empirically tested domain-specific interventions.

Despite this potential redundancy, the ecological model defined progressive clinical practice (though not community practice) in the 1970s and early 1980s. Typical of writings at the time, Paula Allen-Meares and Bruce Lane's (1987) work drew connections between ecological social work and advances in related fields of ethology (the study of animal behavior), ecological psychology (the study of the effects of the physical environment on human psychology), and ethnology (the study of social knowledge in everyday contexts). Allen-Meares and Lane developed a model of assessment that epitomized the orderly inclusion of ecological factors. They described how determinism underlies complex transactional processes. This description was only a short step from the psychological ecology formula, $B = f(P, E)$, with which Kurt Lewin (1951) showed that behavior is a function of persons in interaction with their environment.

Following Lewin's work in field theory, Urie Bronfenbrenner (1979) pushed the ecological perspective to a respectable position in psychology. Bronfenbrenner's work proved similarly useful to social work, which, as a profession, relies in part on psychological theory to inform practice. Writing for his more conservative colleagues in the field of developmental psychology, who placed little importance on assessing a child's environment as a causal factor in psychopathology, Bronfenbrenner explained, "The ecology of human development involves the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation between an active, growing human being and the changing properties of the immediate settings in which the developing person lives, as this process is affected by relations between these settings, and by the larger contexts in which the settings are embedded" (1979, p. 21).

Bronfenbrenner notes that although all behaviorists acknowledge that people and their environments interact, little attention was actually being paid to the social determinants of the phenomena under study. Only the most rudimentary attention was given to a critical conceptualization

of the environment. Instead, behaviorists homogenized the environment into a set of distinct variables associated mostly with a person's social address. This practice contrasted with the subtle nuances systematically investigated by these same researchers in their studies of the human psyche. Only recently has there been evidence that more intensive ecological inquiry is both possible and necessary. For example, there is now sufficient evidence to hypothesize that ecological forces at play in the world beyond the family affect a child's development as much or more than the child's interaction with parents (Rich 1998).

Related work in the area of family therapy paralleled developments in ecological social work and Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of human development. Ecological perspectives on ethnicity, race, and gender in practice situations promised a more critical understanding of the power implicit in transactional processes. These perspectives, however, developed rather modestly and did not initially challenge or deconstruct dominant values. For example, John Spiegel (1982) discusses a Puerto Rican family in which the father is overly controlling of the daughter and her social and sexual development:

Because we are dealing with families based on Lineal or Collateral orientation, it is important to line ourselves up with the head of the family. This is normally the father, but in his absence it can be the mother or grandmother. Since the head of the family holds culturally sanctioned power, we would not be able to gain entree into the family without sincerely respecting that power and the objectives he or she has in mind for the family. Thus we would not be able to get very far if we indicated that one of our goals was to obtain autonomy or individuation for a wife or daughter. (P. 48)

Proponents of critical, feminist, and postmodern theories of intervention will see the problem with this transactional approach, which charges the therapist with expert knowledge and proposes a set of Western values that are not openly deconstructed during the intervention (see Van den Bergh 1995; White 1995). Issues of oppression and power were not wholly addressed in ecological social work practice until later in the 1980s in work by Deborah Luepnitz (1988) and Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick (1989), who, among others, adopted transactional models that ascribed no final causality to system components and acknowledged the ethnocentrism and sexism of social workers.

The shift from a depoliticized, though contextually sensitive, ecological social work to overt criticism of the differences in power inherent in transactional processes is most evident in Germain and Gitterman's revised edition of their classic text on the life model. The 1996 edition adds three new conceptual areas to their model: vulnerability, oppression, the use or misuse of power, and social and technological pollution; habitat and niche; and life course, the trajectory taken by individuals, with attention paid to social and cultural determinants of these trajec-

tories. This greater emphasis on contextualization, power, and privilege reflects advances in cultural sensitivity, the politics of location, and the understanding of the mutual dependency among all things human and the natural world.

Arguably, a more progressive theoretical basis is needed if ecological theory is to be defended against its critics. As Malcolm Payne (1991) notes, earlier understandings of ecological theory are less than tenable. Modernists argue that the theory does not explain why things happen or why connections exist. Nor is ecological theory sufficiently prescriptive to inform practice directly. It is overly inclusive, giving us little guidance about what is important to include in a general schema. Further, it does not criticize the entropy of systems that are not viable, leaving unquestioned the value of some systems as they exist. Finally, it is overly generalized, and the language is too complex. These objections suggest that ecosystems or ecological theory, as originally developed, overstate the importance of the parts of a system, making it appear that homeostasis (system stability) is preferable to conflict and change and leaves unchallenged underlying assumptions such as hierarchies and institutions. These criticisms leveled at ecological theory are partly the result of a systems solipsism that has no capacity to deconstruct its own cultural embeddedness. Although not a panacea capable of addressing all these questions, a social and deep ecological response to a systems-based ecology does offer a better understanding of the context and power of the social worker in transaction with those with whom he or she works.

## A New Ecology

### Bookchin's Social Ecology

While sharing similarities with the systems-based theories from which ecological social work originated, a new ecology is rooted theoretically in writings related to social ecology and deep ecology. Murray Bookchin (1982) is credited with coining the term "social ecology" in the late 1970s, referring specifically to the interrelationship between human beings and the natural environment. For Bookchin, adapting the biological construct of ecology to include the social realm of human beings brings with it the potential to understand not only our place in nature but also our relationships with one another. As Bookchin explains:

Put quite simply, ecology deals with the dynamic balance of nature, with the interdependence of living and nonliving things. Since nature also includes human beings, the science must include humanity's role in the natural world—specifically, the character, form, and structure of humanity's relationship with other species and with the inorganic substrate of the biotic environment. From a critical viewpoint, ecology opens to wide purview the vast disequilibrium that has emerged from humanity's split with the natural world. One of nature's very unique species,

*homo sapiens*, has slowly and painstakingly developed from the natural world into a unique social world of its own. As both worlds interact with each other through highly complex phases of evolution, it has become as important to speak of a social ecology as to speak of a natural ecology. (1982, p. 22)

Bookchin argues against the uncritical use of ecological principles by environmentalists, who, he believes, tend to seek peaceful associations with nature but do not challenge its ongoing commodification and plunder. Environmentalism, according to Bookchin, facilitates domination of nature by developing techniques for diminishing the hazards caused by domination. Ecology, as a philosophy, emphasizes instead diversity and complexity, both biological and, by extension, sociocultural. Bookchin challenges the ecology, feminist, and community development movements to seek a nonhierarchical society in which domination of nature by human beings along gender, race, and class lines is abolished. An unapologetic anarchist, Bookchin sees in lessons from ecology, both metaphorically and practically, the path forward to social order without social domination.

Bookchin wrestles with many of the issues confronting the profession of social work. Among these are social organization, hierarchy, holism, homogenization, power, and the privileging of knowledge. As an evolved marxist (Light 1998), Bookchin sees the alienation of human beings from their environment as the result of class, race, and gender struggles, which, over time, have led individuals to subjugate one another and the environment in the pursuit of power and domination. Those in power have ignored lessons from ecology, seeking holism through unity in sameness rather than unity in diversity. Critics of a homogenizing professional discourse in social work argue a similar point, that those who represent the state through its social services pay too little attention to the subjugation of clients and to the dualism between social workers and the communities that they service (Margolin 1997; Hugman 1998).

Bookchin's concept of an ecological society, though more a liberal interpretation of history than a fact-based one, emphasizes just such pluralism within nonhierarchical communities: "Freedom would no longer be placed in opposition to nature, individuality to society, choice to necessity, or personality to the needs of social coherence" (1982, p. 318). As Bookchin explains, "there are no 'kings of the beasts' and no 'lowly ants.' These notions are the projections of our own social attitudes and relationships on the natural world. Virtually all that lives as part of the floral and faunal variety of an ecosystem plays its coequal role in maintaining the balance and integrity of the whole" (1980, pp. 59–60). Building on Bookchin's work, Andrew Light (1998, p. 7) explains that "the history of social and natural evolution has become the history of two competing logics: the logic of spontaneous mutualistic ecological differentiation and

the logic of domination, which works against everything represented by the other."

*Naess's Deep Ecology*

A new ecology for the human services also borrows heavily from the deep ecology of Arne Naess (1989; Reed and Rothenberg 1993; Zimmerman 1994). The inclusion of both Bookchin and Naess under the heading "new ecologists" should not imply conviviality between the two (see Pepper 1993; Benton and Short 1999). There is, however, a synergy between Naess's and Bookchin's ideas and their application to an ecological social work practice.

According to Naess, deep ecology is the study of the mutual dependency found in all aspects of an ecosystem. The intrinsic value of each component exists apart from the value that human beings place on it (Taylor 1994). Within a deep ecology, there is no separation between organic and nonorganic elements. The deep ecologist and Bookchin's social ecologist are conceptually similar: "Deep ecologists call for a shift away from anthropocentric humanism toward an ecocentrism guided by the norm of self-realization for all beings . . . Maintaining that humans *are* nature rendered self-conscious, social ecologists call for small-scale, egalitarian, anarchistic societies, which recognize that human well-being is inextricably bound up with the well-being of the natural world on which human life depends" (Zimmerman 1994, p. 2).

Thinking about the world ecologically allows human beings to look more critically at human communities and, like the deep ecologist, to proclaim that diversity, complexity, and symbiosis are in our own best interest. As Naess explains, the complexity and symbiosis found in a physical environment is inextricably linked to its diversity: "If we are permitted to vary three factors a, b, c in spatial horizontal arrangements, we can only realise six different patterns: abc, acb, bac, bca, cab, cba. If we add one more basic factor, d, the number of arrangements increases to 'four factorial', 24. This illustrates the *intimate relation between complexity and diversity*. When the number of elements increases linearly, the number of possible relationships increases factorially" (Naess 1989, pp. 201–2). Human communities are arguably much the same. Both complexity and diversity protect ecosystems against destruction. Likewise, the concept of symbiosis indicates the unity between the one and the many in ecological relationships between people. In practical terms, Naess argues, "We need types of societies and communities in which one delights in the value-creative aspects of equilibrium rather than the glorification of value-neutral growth; in which being together with other living beings is more important than exploiting or killing them" (1989, p. 24). Mathis Wackernagel and William Rees (1996) use the metaphor of an "ecological footprint" to help us further appreciate our collective human impact and

dependency on the natural environment. In human beings' push toward development, that footprint has grown exponentially. Calls for voluntary simplicity are challenging unbridled growth in a finite ecosystem.

Such limits make sense given this new ecology's emphasis that all things human are only one component of all things natural. A deep ecology promotes the development of a consciousness that, according to ecologists like Bill Devall and George Sessions (1994, p. 113), allows us to see through the "erroneous and dangerous illusions" of dominance. Given this propensity to talk about worldly illusions and the spiritual connection between the individual self and the unified Self as discovered through experiences with nature, deep ecology has been either dismissed or lauded for its celebration of the spiritual—sometimes at the expense of the practical (Pepper 1993; Reed and Rothenberg 1993; Guha 1994, 1995).

Naess at least intended his theory to inform practical applications of ecological theory. He characterized his work as an action-informing philosophy, with each application based on a different interpretation. Naess describes his work as "ecosophy T," an arbitrary letter designation that leaves open the possibility that others will create ecosophy a, b, or c. The ecologically grounded philosophy of the human services put forth here is one such application.

## New Ecology and Human Services Delivery

Naess summarizes the complexity, diversity, and symbiosis that characterize his ecosophy in eight succinct statements, all of which share much in common with Bookchin's conceptualization of social ecology. These principles of a physical ecology can be adapted to inform an ecological practice in the human services. Table 1 details both these eight ecological principles and the corresponding principles for an applied ecological practice. The eight principles for practice in the right-hand column are, however, only one of the many possible adaptations of deep and social ecological theories. Others may view Naess's work as informing a different set of practice principles, and they would be completely justified in creating a complementary "ecosophy" of the human services.

As interpreted here, these eight principles of practice are meant to challenge earlier conceptualizations of ecological practice that produced little change in the business-as-usual approaches found among service providers mandated to change people's behavior (Kemp, Whittaker, and Tracy 1997). For example, a study by Fred Frankel, Robert Myatt, and Dennis Cantwell (1995) examines the effectiveness of training outpatient boys to conform with the behaviors of their popular peers. Parents and teachers were asked if they noticed differences in the boys after the intervention. Frankel and colleagues state: "Our results suggest that it is possible to obtain significant immediate improvement in parent

**Table 1**

Practice Principles of a New Ecology

| Naess's Ecosophy "T"* | New Ecology in Practice |
|---|---|
| 1. The flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth has intrinsic value. The value of nonhuman life forms is independent of the usefulness these may have for narrow human purposes. | Each individual has intrinsic value apart from the meaning or usefulness of the individual to others in his or her community. |
| 2. Richness and diversity of life forms are values in themselves and contribute to the flourishing of human and nonhuman life on earth. | The diversity of culture and social organization offers the potential for unique solutions to emerge to shared human challenges. |
| 3. Human beings have no right to reduce this richness and diversity except to satisfy vital needs. | Structured alliances between communities and the services that provide for them must act to increase the diversity of resources that are directly available to individuals and families to help them help themselves. |
| 4. Present human interference with the nonhuman world is excessive, and the situation is rapidly worsening. | A service delivery system that is managed by community stakeholders, not bureaucracies, is the least likely to contribute to social disintegration. |
| 5. The flourishing of human life and cultures is compatible with a substantial decrease of the human population. | Human service delivery systems work best when they are kept small, allowing resources to be divested to the communities being served. |
| 6. Significant changes of life conditions for the better requires changes in policies. These affect basic economic, technological, and ideological structures. | Public policy is needed that expands the capacity of communities and their members to function on their own by providing the resources they need to sustain their well-being. |
| 7. The ideological change is mainly that of appreciating life quality (dwelling in situations of intrinsic value) rather than adhering to a high standard of living. | What is good for individuals and their communities is the benchmark of enlightened social and economic development. |
| 8. Those who subscribe to the foregoing points have an obligation directly or indirectly to participate in the attempt to implement the necessary changes. | Those who believe in the above points have an ethical obligation to achieve these goals by changing the methods of their practice and the structure of the organizations for which they work. |

  * Adapted from Naess 1989, p. 29.

and teacher ratings of outpatient boys' social skills. This was accomplished by the use of a relatively brief training program designed to train boys to act more like their popular peers. Parents were integrated into the treatment effort with beneficial effects" (pp. 308–9). This type of intervention is not what a professional practice informed by deep and social ecological principles looks like, though it is currently accepted as an example of ecological social work. Such planned intervention, though apparently effective, was based on expert knowledge that work-

ers used to change the boys' behavior in predetermined ways. The boys were never consulted about the direction of the changes. Success was measured by unquestioned standards of compliance in home and school environments, compliance that may, or may not, be contextually relevant to the boys' health and well-being (see Tyler et al. 1992; Cirillo 2000; Ungar and Teram 2000).

The eight principles of an ecosophy of the human services are an attempt to resolve these shortcomings and bring ecological models of social work in line with developments in feminist, critical, and postmodern theories related to the human services. An ecological practice that values, for example, intrinsic worth and mutuality may use any of a number of traditional individual or community interventions but does so as long as each openly challenges the interventions' presumed authenticity with clients. However, while clients, not practitioners, should decide the appropriateness of the interventions used, social agendas will still dictate what is and is not a problem requiring attention. This, then, leads to the necessary deconstruction of the relative power and privilege of each stakeholder's standpoint vis-à-vis the problem, its hypothesized solution, and the interventions to achieve goals that may or may not be contested. In the above example, we may ask disordered boys about the benefits of their behavior, and we may deconstruct the privileged professional discourse that defines for the boys their status as healthy or unhealthy. But all of this takes place constrained by socially constructed norms that dictate what is tolerable and intolerable behavior among youth (Stebbins 1996).

In practice, interventions informed by a new ecology would elicit the meanings that the boys attach to their lived experiences. From this understanding, those intervening can match what they offer to what the boys say they need. Negotiations would proceed that either invest more power in the boys' solutions or behaviors, which in turn gives them legitimacy (see Taylor, Gilligan, and Sullivan 1995), or focus on helping the boys achieve their preferred lifestyles in ways that bring them wider social acceptance. The effectiveness of interventions like these is already well documented in the literature with delinquents (Ungar 2001), young women with depression (Nylund and Ceske 1997), children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Nylund and Corsiglia 1996), and drug-using or drug-abusing youth (Sanders 1997).

## Eight Principles in Practice

### Intrinsic Value

In considering the best interests of their clients, social workers are advised to see "the client as an individual, a member of a family unit, a member of a community, a person with a distinct ancestry or culture"

(Canadian Association of Social Workers 1994, p. 4). In the heterono-mous ethics (Loewenberg, Dolgoff, and Harrington 2000) of an eco-logical practice, this belief is anchored to a philosophy that promotes each individual's intrinsic value regardless of his or her function in the larger community. In practice, this means that, in and of themselves, all who participate in the associational life of a community have value, though the power, privilege, and beliefs embedded in the dominant culture will determine at any given moment which attributes are valued and which are not.

A social work practice informed by new ecology demonstrates a healthy respect for relativism in the way that professional mandates are expressed. One need only think of the debate over spanking to witness the intrinsic value of multiple realities. Advocates for spanking talk of their religious or moral duty and how their actions are in the best interest of the child; to refrain from corporal punishment is interpreted as a sign of neglectful parenting. Though marginal at this time, it is not long since such views were roundly upheld by most social institutions (Bullen 1991). A practice informed by a new ecology is self-critical, and while different health discourses compete, the practitioner's role is to appreciate the temporal and social dimension of interventions. A new ecology orients practitioners to this relativism, in the same way as do postmodern interpretations of social work (Leonard 1997).

*Diversity and Diverse Solutions*

As Leslie Margolin (1997) explains, the profession of social work has not reflected enough on the conflict between doing good and being an agent of social control. In the second part of that mandate, the goals are pre-determined and the outcomes generalized. It is difficult in practice to value what each unique population and its community brings to the dis-course on health. We commit, through our categorization of good and bad behaviors, a sin of omission. "The social work narratives that appear on the surface always seem to suggest underlying counternarratives: When social work describes its clients one way, all the other infinite ways those clients could be described are excluded. When social work establishes one reality, it necessarily blocks others: it is both positive and negative, simultaneously" (Margolin 1997, p. 7).

Social workers who approach their mandate with the bias of privilege will fail to notice community resources that offer alternative models of coping. For example, divesting mandated control to communities in order to show respect for indigenous patterns of healing and care, which is occurring in aboriginal communities, demands of child welfare workers a flexibility and tolerance for diversity (Borg, Brownlee, and Delaney 1995; Connors and Maidman 2001). The argument against such divestment has been that doing so risks a plethora of relativistic interpretations and stan-

dards of practice that pit one reality against another, leaving children at greater risk of harm. The science of a new ecology challenges us to attack at a fundamental level the problems with hierarchical and colonialist interpretations of care and intervention. It integrates into social work practice a perspective that promotes the value of diversity and diverse solutions to the problems facing distinctly different populations.

### Structured Alliances

Practice based on the principles of a new ecology promotes the indigenous helping capacities of marginalized communities as ends in themselves. This new ecology provides a critique of the hierarchical and bureau-centric way in which elites manipulate community processes to achieve their own goals. For example, much of the literature on informal social networks starts with the premise that informal helpers can accomplish what professionals are unable to do (Garbarino 1983; Mastronardi 1990; McKnight 1995; Cameron and Vanderwoerd 1997). There remains, however, an unquestioned belief by professionals who remain outsiders to the communities they service that there exists a predetermined set of outcomes that they achieve through subtle manipulation of local resources. A more politicized and ecological model of practice emphasizes sharing health resources with communities: placing professionals and the dollars that go with their positions in community-based organizations accountable to community boards, engaging in processes that allow communities to determine the goals of interventions, and changing the rigid bureau-centrism of social work practice (e.g., holding meetings in spaces that are comfortable ecologically for clients, such as churches and health clinics, rather than the sanitized, but convenient, boardrooms and meeting rooms of government offices).

### Management by Stakeholders

Managerialism in social services, like environmentalism, leaves unquestioned issues of hierarchy and power and the objectification of community as an extension of services rather than understanding formal services as an extension of the community (Ungar, Teram, and Picketts 2001). Social workers have become too much like functionaries of the state who support the growing disenfranchisement of people from their own natural helping systems (Payne 1991; McKnight 1995).

Bookchin deplores those he terms "managerial radicals," who emphasize change processes without due consideration to the ends being sought. As Bookchin explains: "Environmentalism tends to reduce nature to a storage bin of 'natural resources' or 'raw materials.' . . . The 'harmony' of the environmentalist centers around the development of new techniques for plundering the natural world with minimal disruption of the human 'habitat'" (1982, p. 21). The profession of social work

may have embraced ecological practice models in the past, but social workers have not prevented individuals and their communities from becoming commodified as clients rather than being interdependent partners in service delivery systems (Fisher and Karger 1997; Margolin 1997).

*Divestment to Community*

While these ideas will be attractive to many who already resist the homogenizing effects of bureau-centric practice, there is no getting around the fact that the ecological social worker is calling on the self-perpetuating system of his or her employer to show tolerance for the very diversity that threatens it. Just as ecocentrism, as opposed to anthropocentrism, encourages us to think as individuals but act in ways that recognize our place in nature, the ecologically oriented social worker must be part of a professional discipline while not privileging professional discourse.

Centralized services may be efficient for managers, and provincial standards a legal necessity, but such models seldom put resources where they are most needed, which undermines a community's capacity to care for itself. Ironically, it is in resource-poor rural communities that social workers have been most effective marshaling resources, working informally, building alliances, situating themselves in community-relevant structures, and stretching meager financial resources (Martinez-Brawley 1993; Brownlee and Delaney 1997).

*Public Policy and Community Empowerment*

Public policy that reflects a new ecology addresses the exigencies of community life at multiple levels. For example, preventing child abuse is not accomplished through programmed interventions alone. As Ray Peters and his colleagues (Peters et al. 2001, p. 211) explain, "While children from any socioeconomic status can be abused or neglected, low-income families experience higher rates of child abuse, because poverty increases the severity and range of stresses to which these families are exposed. Thus, the issues of promoting family and child wellness and preventing child abuse and neglect become tied to economic and workplace policies that impact child poverty." Public policy that addresses poverty in ways that promote community control over resources and that tolerates a multiplicity of constructions of healthy families will contribute to solving family problems such as child abuse. This has been a common thread in ecological practice, and yet, as Peters and colleagues observe, "Why, after ten years of advocacy for social policies to address child poverty, has the rate of child poverty increased?" (2001, p. 211). Alternate models of ecological practice, which emphasize social responsibility for families, require better articulation (Eichler 1997).

*Enlightened Development*

The social worker whose practice reflects a deep and social ecology recognizes that development, either in how service delivery systems function, or in how a community promotes its economic and social well-being, must provide sustained benefits to the greatest number of community members. For example, under this model, one would question the value of superprisons and the multibillion dollar corrections industry, which have shown no positive effect on those incarcerated and have resulted, ironically, in no decrease in crime (Cayley 1998). In contrast, local initiatives modeled on aboriginal restorative justice forums have been shown to be effective for both property crimes and crimes of violence and, of much more benefit to communities, perpetrators, and, in some cases, victims (Van Den Berg and Grealish 1996; Burford and Pennell 1998). Such localized initiatives maintain community ownership for problems and solutions.

*Ethical Obligations to Foster Change*

Margolin writes skeptically that "social workers may claim Jane Addams as their source of inspiration, but they *do* Mary Richmond" (1997, p. 4). Current trends point to the depoliticization of social work as the profession becomes less involved in community initiatives (Fisher and Karger 1997). Bob Mullaly observes that "if social workers truly believe in the values and ideals they espouse, then they cannot subscribe to and try to maintain a social order that contradicts and violates many of these same values and ideals" (1997, p. 101). As Margolin (1997) demonstrates, social workers speak of institutional causes of racism and poverty, but so much of the discourse in which workers participate day-to-day continues to focus on individual pathology instead of community capacity. To take an ecological stance obligates social workers (and their employers) to put into practice their commitment to broad social change through participation in politicized community initiatives and organizations.

## Practically There

Social work practice based on these eight principles of a new ecology is an attempt to celebrate diversity in constructions of health and the deconstruction of the relative power of the competing discourses found among privileged professional service providers and the marginalized groups that they serve. Such acceptance of differences reflects a growing call by clients for more inclusive services that emphasize the needs of special groups such as immigrants, aboriginal peoples, and at-risk populations (Canadian Association of Social Workers 2001). Deconstruction of these discourses does not necessarily mean, however, the privileging

of all discourses equally. The practitioner informed by a new ecology simply starts from the premise that assumptions of causality and health are relative across cultures and time, with stakeholders participating more or less vocally in the construction of the normative assumptions that constrain their lives and dictate the appropriateness of particular interventions. The eight principles of a deeper, more social, ecological practice presented above offer a beginning guide to practitioners who wish to operationalize ecological theory in nonoppressive ways.

Although the eight principles discussed above remind social workers of their embeddedness in communities and the complexity of clients, further study is needed to understand the applicability of social and deep ecology to social work. Acknowledging the mutual dependencies and dynamics of power between professionals and those that they serve does not resolve questions of how social workers can mediate differences among social groups and among these groups, service providers, and the providers' employers. Looking to feminist, critical, and postmodern understandings of social work practice may help to inform this practical application of ecological theory while also contributing a progressive ecological perspective to these other practice discourses. Nevertheless, arbitrary definitions by communities as to what are and are not appropriate standards of behavior, and what constitutes effective practice in each context, will remain subjects of debate between those with differing amounts of power.

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## Note