

Environmental Justice and Social Work: A Call to Expand the Social Work Profession to Include Environmental Justice

Dominoe Jarvis

“What we are doing to the forests of the world is but a mirror reflection of what we are doing to ourselves and to one another.”
— Mahatma Gandhi

Concern for environmental justice has increased in recent decades. Although the environmental justice field is closely linked to social justice, the social work profession has yet to gain a substantive involvement in environmental justice efforts. This article is a call to action for the social work profession and explains why the profession is ideally suited to address issues of environmental justice. It examines how issues of environmental injustice, such as the location of industrial waste facilities in predominantly minority communities, often affect those people who are most afflicted by other forms of injustice. A review of recent literature explains how the social work profession can shift its framework and make important connections to environmental justice. This article also discusses three recommendations for the social work profession to become involved in environmental justice.

The Critical Need for Social Workers in the Environmental Justice Field

In recent decades, there has been a growing concern for environmental justice. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA) definition of environmental justice establishes it as a social justice issue: environmental justice is “the fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people regardless of race, color, sex, national origin, or income with respect to the development, implementation, and enforcement of environmental laws, regulations, and policies” (U.S. EPA). Social work has a realistic and evidence-based understanding of social justice as well as a commitment to serve society’s most vulnerable populations; however, the profession has yet to gain a substantive in-

involvement in environmental justice efforts. The social work profession has been slow to respond to environmental concerns and to the devastating effects of environmental injustice on the health of individuals and communities served by social workers, specifically minority and poor communities.

Environmental destruction and devastation are carried disproportionately by disadvantaged and marginalized groups (Gray & Coates, 2012). In failing to gain a considerable presence in the environmental justice field, and by not taking advantage of the opportunity to grasp environmental justice as a legitimate professional identity (Kemp, 2011), the social work profession is neglecting its ethical responsibility to the individuals it serves. As part of the profession's ethical principles, social work is responsible for helping those in need, addressing social problems, and confronting social injustice (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2008). It is imperative and relevant for the principles of social work to extend to environmental justice through social work's commitment to vulnerable individuals and communities.

Forming multidisciplinary partnerships is an important and effective step toward achieving environmental justice. A diverse group of professionals—such as engineers, scientists, business people, urban planners, and those in the legal profession—has focused heavily on environmental concerns within its practice. Mainstream social work, however, has concentrated acutely on social issues and has been disconnected from topics concerning the natural and physical environment (Coates, 2005). Social work often involves inclusive, multidisciplinary efforts to solve problems within communities and to address social justice and, as a result, is well suited to take on a participatory role in the environmental justice movement (Freisthler & Crampton, 2009; Schmitz, Matyok, Sloan, & James, 2011). Yet, the social work profession is missing an important opportunity to close the gap between social and environmental justice concerns and to be recognized as a profession that is nondiscriminatory when it comes to the social justice issues it supports and pursues. Social workers can lend critical support to environmental justice work and the time has come for the social work profession to realize its poten-

tial to make a significant difference in the environmental justice field. Social work education must contribute to the available scholarly research and connect social work's long-established social justice values and commitments with environmental justice issues (Jones, 2006).

This article explains why the social work profession is ideally suited to address issues of environmental justice. First, it will examine how issues of environmental injustice, such as the location of industrial waste facilities in predominantly minority communities, often affect those most afflicted by other forms of injustice. Second, the article will review recent literature that explains how the social work profession can shift its framework and make important connections to environmental justice. Lastly, as a means of incorporating environmental justice into the field of social work, the article offers three recommendations for current and future social workers.

The Inequitable Distribution of Environmental Burdens

Various studies and literature indicate that environmental pollution disproportionately affects minority and low-income populations (Arora and Cason, 1999; Bullard, 1990; United Church of Christ, 1987). Minority and poor communities bear the burden of environmental problems that are forced upon them by decision makers and more empowered communities that subscribe to the notion of 'not in my back yard'. According to Besthorn and Saleeby (2003), this inequality in healthy environments "results in the further marginalization of already disenfranchised people" (p. 9). A 2005 government research project concludes that African Americans are nearly 80% more likely to live in close proximity to hazardous pollution sites than white Americans (Associated Press, 2005). African Americans are not only exposed to a disproportionate amount of pollutants from industrial facilities but also suffer from higher levels of lead poisoning, a by-product of living close to industrial facilities (Adeola, 1994; Jones & Rainey, 2006). Research has shown that exposure to these pollutants is connected to diseases such as asthma and cancer (Department of Health and Human Services, 2012). Locally

unwanted land uses (known as LULUs), such as waste facilities and industrial disposal sites, disproportionately affect minority and poor communities throughout the country (Mohai & Saha, 2006). The locating of LULUs near minority and poor communities is evidence that land-use decisions favor those with more political and economic influence.

An example of environmental injustice can be found in New York City within walking distance of the Columbia University School of Social Work. The North River Wastewater Treatment Plant, located in a predominantly minority and low-income neighborhood in West Harlem, is a sewage treatment facility that was engrossed in controversy during its decades of planning and even after its completion in 1986. The sewage treatment facility was originally planned to be built near 72nd street, on the Upper West Side. Due to a decision by the New York City Planning Commission, the facility was relocated to 137th Street in West Harlem (Miller, 1993). The proposed site for the facility was relocated from the affluent Upper West Side community to West Harlem because it was considered “incompatible” with development plans for the Upper West Side (Miller, 1993, p. 709). The coalition that opposed the plant at 72nd Street was better funded and better able to lobby the city’s decision makers than those who opposed the plant in Harlem. The West Harlem community was outraged that a waste treatment facility would be located so close to their homes and schools, yet the facility would be built regardless of disapproval and protest. As a limited compromise, the City built Riverbank State Park, a twenty-eight acre park on top of the sewage facility (Miller, 1993).

The Riverbank State Park was built as “a mitigation measure” (Miller, 1993, p. 711) to compensate residents for the wastewater treatment facility being built in such close proximity to their homes. Residents soon began to experience foul odors coming from the waste treatment site (Severo, 1989). While the residents of West Harlem received a new park, they were plagued by a waste treatment facility nearby that affected their daily lives. At 72nd Street, the original proposed site for the facility, there are now thousands of units of additional luxury housing and acres of additional parkland. The more affluent community of the Upper

West Side were presented with increased housing and improvement to their parkland, while the poorer neighborhood of West Harlem received parkland in exchange for having an odorous facility in their neighborhood. In this particular case, social workers could have helped the West Harlem community mobilize and take action to amend this environmental injustice. Social workers can use their knowledge of advocacy and community organizing to help individuals and communities facing similar situations.

A Shift in the Social Work Framework to Include Environmental Justice

Social work has always been concerned with contemporary social issues and has continually shifted to address and meet the needs of vulnerable people. Realizing that the profession needed to adapt to better serve clients, Mary Richmond pioneered the social work practice of visiting clients in their home environments. She recognized the physical environment as significant to social work, but only in connection to poverty (Richmond, 1922). The social work profession has evolved tremendously since Richmond's time and has adapted to address the current needs affecting the many populations served. Richmond's practice of visiting clients in their home environment can be viewed as an early approach to the person-in-environment perspective. Today, social work maintains a strong emphasis on the person-in-environment perspective, which considers individuals as active participants in a larger social system. Yet the perspective maintains a narrow definition of "environment" that includes the social but disregards the natural environment. Excluding the natural environment has perhaps contributed to the profession's slow involvement in environmental justice. In order to gain substantial involvement in the field of environmental justice, it is imperative that the profession broaden its definition of the person-in-environment perspective to encompass the physical and natural environments.

While social work's practicing professionals are aware of the importance of environmental issues, this has not affected their practice. Marlow & Van Rooyen (2001) embarked on an exploratory study aimed at raising the awareness of environmental issues

with social workers and to begin to develop a framework for social work interventions that are environmentally related. The study asked participants, social workers in both the U.S. and South Africa, about their personal concern for the environment and the inclusion of environmental issues within their practices. The study found that 92.8% of respondents described environmental issues as personally important, but only 43.2% actually addressed these issues in their practice (Marlow & Van Rooyen, 2001). Perhaps it can be deduced from this study that social workers are aware of environmental issues, but tend to concentrate on the social environment and may lack the training to include environmental concerns into their professional identities. Social workers are adept in responding to social justice issues and will be better prepared to address issues of environmental justice after receiving specific training through social work curricula. Changes in social work curricula to include the natural environment are essential in establishing the social work profession in environmental research, policy, and practice.

It is necessary for the contemporary social work profession to acknowledge the consequences of environmental injustice on vulnerable populations (Miller, Hayward, & Shaw, 2011) and begin to engage in such work, which may lead to a better understanding of the disproportionate effect that environmental degradation has on minority and poor communities. In building research and knowledge about the need for social work's involvement in addressing environmental concerns, it is imperative that social workers "include an analysis of the tensions between racism, classism, environmentalism, and economic development" (Furman & Gruenwald, 2004, p. 48). The question in implementing this suggested change to the profession is whether social work will remain committed primarily to the social needs of marginalized populations or heed environmental justice considerations to diversify its commitments and embrace issues that arise from environmental injustice (Gray & Coates, 2012). The challenge to include environmental justice as part of the profession's social justice framework is necessary, overdue, and one that social workers should actively pursue in order to maintain relevancy within the field of social justice.

Conclusion

At present, there is a deficit in the current social work education and scholarship in addressing the nexus of environmental justice, social work, and social justice. While there is a growth in awareness of environmental justice, the topic is still under-acknowledged in the social work profession, and there is a lack of available information on the important role and involvement of social work in environmental concerns. It is therefore crucial for social workers, current and future, to start addressing environmental inequality endured by the individuals the profession serves.

As a profession that is focused on social justice principles, it is necessary that social work include environmental concerns in its areas of practice. Through exploring and incorporating environmental justice in their practices, social workers can begin to help the people they serve by broadening their understanding of environment to include not just the social, but also the natural and physical environment. First, it is important that social work courses and field education offer students the opportunity to study the nexus between environmental justice and social work (Dewane, 2011). This is necessary for the future of the profession if social work is to become involved as a serious participant or leader in environmental justice. Second, shifts in practice, training, and interventions will be necessary before implementing environmental justice content into graduate social work curricula (Freisthler & Crampton, 2009). Shifts can begin through collaborating with other disciplines to achieve a clear understanding of environmental justice content and allowing the profession to incorporate multidisciplinary ideas. Third, further research into environmental justice, the effects it has on marginalized populations, and the beneficial involvement of social workers is necessary.

Environmental justice is an interdisciplinary field in which social work has been slow to enter. By acknowledging and engaging with the multidisciplinary culture of environmental justice, social work can become more substantial and comprehensive (Hoff, 2003). Social work research can also bring new ideas to the

field of environmental justice and, likewise, can learn from other disciplines that have already established themselves within the field. Incorporating knowledge from other disciplines will allow social work to evolve and determine responses to the present issues pertaining to the environment and its effects on individuals. The profession's responsibility remains to serve the interests of its clients, who are adversely affected by their environments. Social work has the potential to shape and improve the environment and to become not only an active participant in discussions on environmental justice, but also a leader in the environmental justice movement.

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