‘Off topic in some places (global warming)’: a critical and radical response to connecting social work teaching to a global climate emergency

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In 2012, Lena Dominelli brought us a timely and essential warning that it was time for the social work profession to recognise its role in examining how the environmental crisis will cause hardship and suffering to communities with whom the profession has traditionally worked. It is fair to say that progress has been slow; a search of published module descriptors for social work programmes delivered across Scotland indicates that there remain barriers to engagement with the climate crisis. This article will focus on the importance of incorporating a critical and radical perspective into social work teaching. This will be achieved by reflecting on, first, learning and teaching theory, and, second, psychological theory, such as the theory of normative conduct. Insight into the reasons for resistance to participation in discourse about the impact of the environmental crisis will be explored through reflecting on climate change theory, teaching theory and the curriculum, along with psychological barriers. This article argues that the critical and radical approach to social work teaching is ideally situated to lead on the inclusion of environmental challenges in social work education and practice.

Key words climate change • climate emergency • critical and radical social work • ecological social work

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Introduction

The global pandemic has overshadowed political and media acknowledgement of problems facing the planet in terms of climate change, with such governments as Westminster (Hansard, 2019) and the Scottish government acknowledging the ‘irrefutable evidence’ that humankind and our behaviour is creating an increase in global temperatures (Cunningham, 2019). At the time of writing, some 189 councils in the UK had declared a state of climate emergency.

Therefore, it can be seen as a reasonable response for social work education to address the climate emergency in terms of making social work students aware of the nature of the emergency and preparing them for the tasks that they will have
to undertake to address the needs of people experiencing trauma and catastrophe as a result of climate emergency/change. This article was inspired by one particular statement – ‘Off topic in some places (global warming)’ – made by a student in feedback for a module that had incorporated a teaching session on the climate emergency, which indicated that the student did not fully agree with the need to discuss the climate emergency in social work education. The comment, though isolated from a far greater number of positive responses from the student cohort, encouraged a period of deep reflection on how the topic of climate change can be incorporated into social work education.

The student’s comment inspired the title of this article, in which it is argued that social work educators have a moral obligation to raise awareness of the nature of the climate emergency. I argue that we need to include this subject in our teaching in such a way that students understand its relevance to social work. Furthermore, I will show that using a critical and radical discourse is the most effective and appropriate choice to meet our moral obligations.

The moral imperative

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change created an international treaty (the 2015 Paris Agreement) incorporating an agreement of good faith between nations about climate change. This treaty highlighted the universal threat to the ecosystem of exposure to extreme weather events, threats to food security and threats of displacement. Thorp (2014) provides a convincing argument that nation states and all human participants have a fiduciary duty to uphold commitments to reduce the human impact on climate change.

Academics are beginning to produce compelling evidence for including the climate emergency within our teaching curriculum (Dominelli, 2014; Androff et al, 2017; Boddy et al, 2018). Such evidence is beginning to provide a picture of how both national and international events are impacting casework in social work (Dominelli, 2013; Motanya and Valera, 2016). Furthermore, a sense of obligation to safeguard the planet for future generations, which are certain to suffer the consequences of the inaction of this generation, creates a ‘moral responsibility’ to address this emergency (Connelly and Smith, 2003).

Climate change and social work: the literature

Many notable academics have provided adequate evidence to support the need to address the climate emergency in both social work education and social work practice. The development of such approaches as the ecological model to social work teaching (Appleby et al, 2017; Boetto, 2017; Bailey et al, 2018) and green social work (Dominelli, 2012) in social work education have been influential in furthering the message. The green social work approach is defined by Dominelli (2012) as a practice that seeks social and environmental justice for people living in communities that will be most vulnerable to the negative effects of climate change, reasoning that green social work practice needs to build connections between humans and the natural habitat. This aspiration is important if humanity has any chance of curbing the disasters that are threatening the planet, in particular, those living in the Global South, such as Bangladesh (Mycoo et al, 2022). Eco-social work seeks an integrated approach which
recognises that the destruction of nature is a result of society’s drive for economic wealth, which, in turn, creates economic injustice (Peeters, 2012).

These approaches endorse social workers to be facilitators, coordinators, educators and brokers within communities. The case studies that have been chosen to illustrate these approaches have centred on social work activities that are fundamentally community-based activism.

Yet, social work in the UK has focused on individualist problems, where much of statutory social work practice is immersed in working with individual cases (Munro, 2011; Jones et al., 2018). According to 2021 Scottish social service workforce data, there are 6,235 social workers employed in local authority services performing statutory duties. The statutory social work role is characterised by casework with individuals and or families (Scottish Government, 2010).

Developing community praxis requires social workers to involve themselves in neighbourhood concerns and community activism (Case, 2017). At a time when social workers are struggling with high caseloads, along with restricted funding and resources, this expectation may find practitioners overstretched and struggling to aspire to it (Preston, 2022).

What may be missing is the ability to connect the climate disasters in the Global South with day-to-day functions in the northern hemisphere. This might pose a barrier to utilising green social work practice. Therefore, there needs to be a step that helps students and practitioners appreciate and begin the process towards incorporating environmental approaches into social work practice.

The critical and radical approach to analysis

Based on the premise that the causes of many individual problems, such as poverty, are located in the wider societal structure (Rossiter, 1997), this approach provides a useful framework to help students critically analyse the climate crisis, government and industrial responses to the climate crisis, and the damaging effect on global habitats. In much the same way as the eco-feminist perspective challenges the traditional maintenance theory (Payne, 2005), it contends that social work must ‘move beyond an uncritical acceptance of existing socio political inequities and an un-interrogated assumption that people can and will adapt to their changed environment’ (Alston, 2013: 226). As a starting point, the critical social work position has a long tradition of identifying and challenging this assumption (Rossiter, 1997).

The critical and radical approach has criticised social work education for perpetuating neoliberal political influences on the development of casework by pathologising family and individual tragedies (Jones, 1998; Kamali and Jönsson, 2019). Critical and radical discourse has been instrumental in highlighting the contradictory nature of social work, in particular, where social work practitioners are required to balance the caring and empowerment aspect of social work with the imposed duty to ‘control behaviour’ (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009). Radical social work has also been credited with advocating the need to identify structural factors as at the root cause of problems experienced by the people with whom social workers work (Ferguson, 2008). Challenging the ongoing view held since the 1950s that economic and health-related problems are a result of individual failure (Ferguson, 2008), critical and radical discourse is ideally situated to lead the inclusion of environmental challenges in social work education and practice.
There is a body of discourse that will be familiar to readers of this journal that attests to the influence that neoliberal policies have had on the role of social work. The neoliberal approach in social work encourages private sector growth in the provision of social care and free-market provision, resulting in managerial and eligibility approaches to social care provision. Not only within the UK but also in an international research project, critics have argued that such approaches enforce an individualist view of ‘private troubles’ rather than connecting difficulties encountered to wider societal oppression and problems (Spolander et al, 2014). The neoliberal influence on social work roles, and, by extension, the educational curriculum, has led to a process-oriented role, in which tasks are allocated and cases are completed. Munro’s (2011) review of social work child protection concluded that organisational culture has led to procedural compliance becoming dominant, stating that this, in turn, stifles the development of expertise. Fenton’s (2014) observation that social work students have been found to align their values to these neoliberal policies supports the argument that procedural dominance has inhibited social work’s ability to make links with wider issues, such as climate change.

In July 2018, the International Social Work Journal published a special issue, in which David Jones’ (2018) editorial focused on promoting community and environmental sustainability. It noted that many social workers in the global context appreciate the need to recognise the link between the climate emergency and the direct impact this has on many vulnerable people and their families. However, there was concern expressed at how difficult it would be to create an understanding of how day-to-day practice would be affected by the climate.

Given the current neoliberal aspect of social work, social work students and practitioners may find it difficult to accept a natural link between the day-to-day tasks of assessment in safeguarding with the need to respond to the climate crisis. Indeed, how might a newly qualified social worker feel the urgency of discussions by delegates in climate conferences around the world when they are working within a managerially driven and risk-averse statutory social work office?

Teaching theory

At this juncture, it is worthwhile taking time to consider what research has informed us about how student attitudes are related to learning outcomes concerning education. Educational theorists have discussed how student attitudes towards subjects can have a direct impact on their learning outcomes. A useful framework for understanding student motivation distinguishes between intrinsic motivation, which defines a student who is interested in what they are learning, and extrinsic motivation, which is driven by a need for qualifications and fear of failure (Elton, 1988).

Fear of failure is a common theme in studies relating to learning collated by De Castella et al (2013), who detail self-protective strategies used by students to protect themselves from the harshness of failure or low grades. Among these strategies are concepts called ‘defensive pessimism’ and ‘self-handicapping’, such as leaving tasks to the last minute to provide reasons for not achieving well in academic studies due to concern about how they are perceived by others (Martin et al, 2003). Fear of rebuke and the critical argument that the environmental movement is seen as a middle-class endeavour with little or no regard for the need of people living in urban areas or with the majority world might also influence student attitudes to engage in discussion about the climate (Stevenson, 2007).
Biggs and Tangs’ (2011) learning concept of incorporating learning outcomes has been adopted by many universities. This includes a specific requirement to demonstrate a critical understanding of the impact of climate change on assessing learning outcomes, which is a useful strategy to motivate student engagement in, and understanding of, the ecological model. A growing body of evidence explored by Vracheva et al (2019) is associating positive student engagement with personal, interpersonal and enhanced societal awareness. Student performance and overall improvement in grades can be achieved by engaging student curiosity across the subject, social work practice and wider social domains. Scientists are predicting that unalterable damage to the planet’s ecosystem is imminent (Masson-Delmotte et al, 2020). The importance of making the connection between the climate emergency topics covered within modules and the lived experiences of students is an urgent matter for concern, particularly in placement experience.

**Psychological barriers**

The apparent lack of urgency by government agencies, local authorities and businesses to address the emergency has been documented by scientists and such organisations as Extinction Rebellion (Grossman, 2020; Gills and Morgan, 2020). Some psychological factors have been identified as explaining the lack of engagement by wider society in environmental and climate emergency concerns. Brick and van der Linden (2018) collated a list of barriers that restrict citizens from engaging in action to reduce damaging behaviour towards the environment, including the need for moral imperatives, the lack of social kudos and viewing climate change as an abstract phenomenon.

Locating climate change outside the moral expectations of society, moral foundations theory accepts that the life-changing behaviours required are dependent on a moral focus. Factors that are generally accepted as being required to provide this focus include the identification of a villain of the peace. Given that our day-to-day lifestyle produces carbon emissions, wholesale use of single-use plastics and use of pesticides that are damaging to our ecosystem, it is little wonder that we are reluctant to count ourselves in such a villainous role (van der Werf, 1996; Chen et al, 2020; Fadeeva and VanBerkel, 2020). A review of the literature that has examined the perceived disparity between acceptance and action on climate change has identified two key aspects that create barriers to discussion and acceptance: first, that public attitudes do not include a desire to prioritise or make changes to everyday life; and, second, the political polarisation between governing establishments (Kollmuss and Agyeman, 2002; Kahan et al, 2012; Pidgeon, 2012).

The theory of normative conduct provides insight into what factors need to be in place to enable openness to discussing climate change. There is a lack of descriptive norms to provide people with a clear routine or a lack of injunctive social norms that require behaviour change to fit with societal expectations (Stok and de Ridder, 2019). This is further supported by research into behaviour change using the social norms approach, which has been used as an intervention strategy for promoting positive behaviour change. The premise of this approach is to challenge misperceptions and overestimation of other people’s behaviour (Dempsey et al, 2018). There may well be a lack of public impetus if the perception exists that social standards do not include behaviour change concerning the climate emergency.
The term ‘emergency’ conjures a sense of immediacy, yet when the phrase ‘climate’ precedes the word ‘emergency’, action appears to be slow. One theory posits that the public does not relate to the climate emergency because the problems are perceived to be a distant threat, both in time and geographically. In contrast, consider the speed with which the British government prepared for and instigated food rationing in the build-up to, and outbreak of, the Second World War. This reflected how the general public was in a position where they were able to perceive and act upon a common enemy that was imminently prepared to invade Britain, and quickly accepted the moral duty to preserve and ration goods to combat the enemy at our door (Alcock, 2008). It has been difficult for society to accept the dangerousness and immediacy for action needed when it comes to climate change, thus making it difficult to provide a social construct incorporating social kudos in behaviour change. Students may struggle to relate to addressing the climate emergency because the problems are perceived to be so far away. If we are to encourage them, we must also challenge the neoliberal normative approach and provide adequate evidence to demonstrate the link to social work casework (Dominelli, 2013).

The role of the curriculum: linking the climate to social work

Dominelli (2013) has identified that research and discourse about the climate emergency are often restricted by disciplinary boundaries. This makes it difficult to apply an understanding of changes to our everyday life experiences and, in particular, our social care structures.

The UK frameworks for higher education use qualification descriptors to exemplify outcomes at each framework level. The outcomes-based framework aims to ensure that programmes of study correspond with an agreed level across institutions/awarding bodies. The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) and the Scottish Qualifications Authority (SQA) publish their own frameworks that stipulate requirements for programmes. In this respect, all units taught within programmes must specify learning outcomes for each unit of learning; most courses in higher education structure their programmes around modules of study. Learning outcomes must be based on the range of knowledge and skills needed to successfully complete each module of learning.

According to the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), there are nine institutions accredited to deliver a professional qualification for social work, offering a total of 21 routes to the qualification. These include the undergraduate BA (hons), postgraduate MSW and postgraduate diploma. An online search of published module descriptors for the 21 routes to the social work qualification sought to view the published learning outcomes for the modules delivered in social work programmes to determine where climate crisis or environmental issues were included them. The search of published module descriptors found that none of the core modules delivered on each of the professional programmes made specific reference to climate or environmental issues in their learning outcomes. Four programmes offered elective options in their undergraduate programmes, and two of these programmes offered elective modules that included statements in the learning outcomes on ‘sustainable development’, ‘environment’ and ‘causes of the increase of human population’.

In recent years, the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW, 2022) has initiated a Climate Justice Program to instil education and advocate for the importance
of sustainability. Drawing on the ‘person in the environment’ concept to underpin the requirement to address the need for environmental sustainability (Jones et al, 2018), this move has not been reflected in the recently updated ‘Standards and ethical principles in social work education’ that were published by the SSSC in 2019 (SSSC, 2019). This indicates that despite academic calls to address the climate crisis in social work education (Drolet et al, 2015; Philip and Reish, 2015; Chonody and Olds Sultzum, 2022), the curriculum has yet to fully incorporate one of the most pressing concerns of humanity.

Similarly, the neoliberal impact on social work that is influencing the prevalence of individual licence and personal problems dominates the educational content of social work education, thus causing a reliance on established social work practice, which can make it difficult to include discreet modules within the curriculum (Boetto, 2017). Existing literature points towards three challenges facing social work educators in higher education:

• awareness raising, that is, alerting students to the importance and urgency of climate change;
• providing evidence and examples of how the impact of climate change is impacting on the social work role; and
• establishing if social work education has a role in encouraging social work students to take ownership of their behaviour and their impact on climate change.

We can see how ‘events’ in the world directly impact the tasks that social workers are required to complete. Examples include austerity policies in the UK, which impact on thousands of families who are forced to pay for the bedroom tax, international wars and poverty. Such policies led to Victoria Climbié’s parents having to entrust their daughter to a woman promising her a better life in England. Further examples are the lack of food security experienced by many families due to poverty, the detrimental effects of industrial-based food production and the increase in urban populations (Jacobson, 2007; Besthorn, 2013).

Critical and radical: a syllabus

Utilising the critical and radical approach in teaching provides a natural platform to enable students to engage in topics with a meaningful critical view. It incorporates an ethos rooted in the understanding not only that social workers should indeed work with individuals to help them cope and deal with their individual circumstances, but also that social workers have a moral obligation to understand the influence that the social-economic structures around us have on creating the situations in which our service users find themselves (Leonard, 1975).

Topics of relevance to the syllabus include: a critical investigation of governance and how legislation is formed and influenced by think tanks and other interested parties; an examination of the functionalist and maintenance perspectives (Fook, 2002; Payne, 2005); an understanding of how information and the media are controlled (Chomsky and Herman, 1988); an examination of education and praxis (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2010); a critical investigation into migration (Jones, 2001; Humphries, 2004); and an understanding of the relationship between social work and social justice (Rossiter, 1997). Boddy et al (2018) argue that embedding environmental issues across the
curriculum can help to provide links to climate and environmental concerns, such as floods, food poverty and displacement. Educators can include such scenarios in case studies contained within assessment-of-need sessions.

Appleby et al (2017) have made a clear argument using the ecological model used in systems theory. Social work has a distinct role to play in the environment across the micro, meso and macro domains, particularly in working with families and communities. Fenton’s (2019) model of three steps to being radical can provide a practical link between social work skills and climate emergency concerns. This model considers relationship building, critical thinking and acknowledging the need for moral courage to talk about an issue that is difficult to address. Fenton provides a framework that encapsulates the critical and radical tradition to enable a dialogue about the impact that climate change is having on social worker caseloads.

The predicted increase in adverse weather causing floods, such as those seen in the UK in recent years, will affect vulnerable people in need of social care support (Pidcock, 2014). Dominelli’s (2013) research highlights the dual effect of neoliberal policies that awarded care contracts to out-of-area private providers who were unable to fulfil their contracts when road and rail facilities were made impassable. Dominelli demonstrates that these effects are being felt now and are not just a cause for future concern.

Planning teaching sessions needs to achieve relatedness to social work skills. The important aspect is the meaningfulness attributed to vocational education (Jeno et al, 2018). Housing provision is a significant aspect that all social workers will be familiar with. Loss of land will undoubtedly lead to increased displacement migration, not necessarily restricted to international migration but also including national movement. Coastal erosion is predicted to increase in the UK, with the potential loss of 5,000 properties within 20 years (Masselink et al, 2020). This will undoubtedly create pressures inland on urban and social housing providers, which are already experiencing well-documented pressures (Terry, 2019). Health officials have documented the health risks associated with hot weather for older people, who can be more susceptible to such conditions as heatstroke, heat oedema and heat exhaustion (Leyva et al, 2017). Emerging studies have found that the incident rate of death due to heat-related illnesses across a range of countries, including the UK, has noted that people, particularly those over the age of 65, are vulnerable to death attributed to heat-related mortality during the summer months, particularly in cities. As global warming caused by changing climate conditions continues, there will be an increased need for social care provision to adapt services to meet the care and health needs of our older population (Shakoor and Kosatky, 2009).

There is a need to demonstrate knowledge and skills to address the causes of, and the resulting fallout from, the current climate emergency that we live in. Climate reports from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) have argued for a universal approach to international laws rather than the current state of disjointed inertia (Masson-Delmotte et al, 2020). With such calls for the need to establish a legal framework to address the climate calamity, this surely creates an imperative for the social work profession to share the burden of responsibility in embedding climate change into the curriculum. This would include a strong element that care of the natural habitat be viewed as an important standard within the professional competency of social work (Ringius et al, 2002).
A critical and radical perspective would not view action to tackle climate change as a series of individual or private endeavours. Instead, the critical and radical approach assumes a wider view that both social work as a profession and higher education institutions have a vital function in addressing climate emergencies and planning for future calamities. Building on Boetto's (2017) call for eco-social change, educators must acknowledge the interrelationship and dependence that humanity has on the natural world.

The detrimental impact on the climate and our ecosystem of such contributory factors as environmental degradation (Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, 2005) and the prioritisation of human economic needs over non-human needs (Jolibert et al, 2009) will continue to create problems for humans. Recent postulation on the emergence of COVID-19 has attributed zoonotic transmission as a possibility (WHO, 2021). This will add to the challenges and hardships that will inevitably affect most severely our most vulnerable members of society.

Conclusion

The problems facing the planet in terms of climate change have been documented by scientists working collaboratively worldwide. In the UK, this has led to 189 councils in the UK declaring a state of climate emergency. There is compelling evidence that the ensuing changes to weather and sea levels will cause problems to our food security and land loss, causing additional pressures on housing provision and social and health care provision. This article has acknowledged that careful consideration is required to establish a route to raising awareness in field casework. It has also argued that the critical and radical approach provides the necessary framework to achieve this.

The need to incorporate environmental issues into the social work education curriculum is an important element of accepting liability for behaviour change before it is too late. Therefore, it is imperative that social work education actively engages with environmental concerns within its curriculum. This will ensure that professionals are equipped with sufficient knowledge and skills to cope with the repercussions from ensuing climatic disasters, threats to food security and the possibility of further pandemics.

This article has explored the psychological barriers that prevent people from engaging in discussion of, and planning for, climate change, such as disparities between an acceptance of the scientific evidence and the desire to make lifestyle changes. The article has also reviewed learning and teaching theory to inform and provide recommendations that will help educators remove barriers to student learning and engagement in this area. The use of climate change theory and Fenton's (2019) framework complements the critical and radical tradition.

It is therefore vital that social work education engages in research to both predict and plan for the social work response to the needs of service users and families as the effects of climate change continue to impact on our lives. In conclusion, the critical and radical approach is ideally situated to prepare social work students appropriately to meet future needs.

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References


