Natural Connections: Social Work’s Role in Mending Human and Environmental Relationships

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Natural Connections: Social Work’s Role in Mending Human and Environmental Relationships

by

Leah Prussia

A Banded Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment Of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Social Work

St. Catherine University | University of Saint Thomas School of Social Work

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Abstract

Just as seasons shift and migration patterns modify in response to human impact, so too must social work. Along with the human contingency silenced by oppression, climate change disproportionately burdens the voiceless: the rooted, Nibi – water, Aki – Earth, winged, four-legged, swimmers, and crawlers. Though the natural world has become part of social work’s discourse in recent decades, it is time to move beyond contemplative words and take action. This banded dissertation consists of three scholarly products that explore the past and present state of social work’s relationship with the natural environment through the frames of Indigenous knowledge and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) and suggests a means to return to where we (humanity and social work) started – the beginning. Product one reviews the history of disconnection between humans and the environment, applies Indigenous wisdom and RCT to define social work’s role with the natural world, and reframes environmental rights as human rights. Product two is an exploratory archival study that examines the question: what was the relationship of early social work with the natural environment. The research utilizes Indigenous methodology and RCT to analyze data from three New York City Settlement houses. Product three summarizes information from a presentation that took place on July 7, 2018, at the Joint World Conference on Social Work, Education, and Social Development in Dublin, Ireland. The presentation outlines a conceptual framework that combines Indigenous wisdom and Western knowledge into a model to heal self and the environment by listening to and honoring the body’s innate ability to repair in collaboration with the natural world. This scholarship is a call to the profession to welcome and assume its role in mending the rift between humans and the environment.
Keywords: anthropocene, environmental rights, Indigenous knowledge, natural environment, relational-cultural theory, settlement house, social work history, solastalgia, somatic literacy
Acknowledgements and Dedication

This work was made possible through the love, support, and teachings from the Manidoog, my ancestors, elders, family, friends, and colleagues. I want to say miigwech to Rick and Diann Prussia, for bringing me into this world and my son, Zaryn, for giving my life purpose. I want to acknowledge the elders and teachers on my journey that have passed: Gladys Prussia, Russ Miller, Earl and Kathy Hoagland, Tommy Stillday, Joe Potter, Joe Bush, Andrew and Mary Favorite, Anna Gibbs, Leonard Moose, Jim Northrup, and Josephine Mandamin. Elders, friends, and colleagues that continue to teach me: Mary Moose, Stephanie Williams, Robert Shimek, Roxanne DeLille, Sharon Day, Don Christie, Tommy Woon, Thea Lee, Lisa Brunner, Giniw Giizhig, Rob Brown, Chad Shaaawano Uran, Michael Wassegijig Price, Tom Goldtooth, Connie Gunderson, Judith Jordan, Maureen Walker, Amy Banks, Emily Annette, Simon Zornes, Zhaawanong Binesii, Cathryne Schmitz, Diane Long, Katie Williams, DSW Advisors: Mari Ann Graham and Kingsley Chigbu, Faculty and Staff from St. Catherine University – University of St. Thomas, and the ever-talented DSW Class of 2019.

This work is dedicated to those that give so much and ask nothing: the fliers, swimmers, crawlers, four-leggeds, Aki- Earth, Nibi – water, rooted relatives, and the next seven generations.
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Natural Connections: Social Work’s Role in Mending Human and Environmental Relationships

Both humans and the natural world are under ongoing threat by some individuals in power that foster alliances with greed, willful ignorance, and disregard for life. Oppressive acts impact humanity and all inhabitants of Earth. According to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC, n.d.), the United States (U.S.) and China together are responsible for producing approximately 40% of the world’s greenhouse gas emissions (Wang & Cheng, 2018). In 2017, the 45th president of the U.S. announced that the second leading producer of greenhouse gas emissions would be withdrawing from the Paris Agreement effective 2020 (Milman, 2018). The Paris Agreement on climate mitigation is a commitment by countries to monitor and reduce their impact on global climate change (UNFCCC, 2018). Besides withdrawal from the accord, the U.S. has proposed to rollback protections for endangered species, increase logging on public land, and start offshore drilling in the Arctic (Greshko et al., 2019). All of the shortsighted actions negatively touch the most vulnerable: oppressed human groups and the natural world. At a time when environmental action and human response is crucial, the social work profession needs to recognize the knowledge, skills, and values it holds in restoring the relationship between humans and the natural world.

Social work has lingered on the periphery of scholarly discourse related to its role with the natural environment for a few decades (Besthorn, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2012; McKinnon, 2008; Zapf, 2010). Recent initiatives in social work have recognized the profession’s role and have translated academic thought into beginning action (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013; Miller & Hayward, 2014). One clear response was CSWE’s sanctioning of the Committee on Environmental Justice in 2015 (CSWE, n.d.). The committee is responsible for initiatives surrounding green social work and falls under the purview of the Commissions for Diversity and Social and Economic Justice and Global
Social Work Education. Shortly after development, an environmental justice competency was added to the latest release of CSWE’s Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (CSWE, 2015). The Grand Challenges for Social Work were outlined that same year by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW, 2015]. One of the Grand Challenges includes the impetus to “create social responses to a changing environment” (AASWSW, 2015, p. 2). Though these action steps are forward momentum for the profession to expand to a person and environment approach, it is anthropocentric and falls short of protecting the natural world impacted by poor policy, for-profit negligence, and individual malfeasance.

This banded dissertation seeks to contribute to the profession’s movement toward people and the natural environment through the addition of three products that aid in historical understanding and theoretical coherence of full inclusion of all that inhabit Aki - Earth. The scholarship examines the intersection of the history and involvement of early social work with the natural environment and suggests ways to further the profession in its integration of the natural world in its mission and purpose. By illuminating the synthesis of social work, nature, Indigenous knowledge, and RCT, the profession may re-embrace what has been missing from the formula for necessary personal and planetary healing - relationships.

**Conceptual Framework**

The conceptual framework for this scholarship is guided by both Indigenous knowledge and Western ways of knowing. The natural environment will be included in the conceptual framework as an integral living system, a system that one depends upon not only to survive, but also thrive in this world. The import of acknowledgement and inclusion of the natural environment in a profession dedicated to serving those who are marginalized by those in power will be illustrated through the synthesis of traditional Indigenous teachings and RCT.
Andrew Favorite, Gaawaabaabiganikaag (White Earth) Elder, frequently shared, “We are all indigenous to somewhere” (personal communication, Fall 2007). These words convey that at one time, all humans were in relationship with the natural world. Humans were students of the environment, learning from the plant and animal worlds and respecting relationships with all of creation (Deloria, 1999; Johnston, 1992; Johnston, 2004). Humans learned about medicines from their relatives (e.g. animals and plants), along with basic principles of give and take (Kimmerer, 2013; Peacock & Wisuri, 2001). At one time, mutuality was inherent to the daily interaction between all human groups around the world and the environment.

According to Gerhard Lenski’s Critical Theory (1984), as some humans began exercising greater power over life forms through technological advances (domestication of animals, genetic modification of the plant world, harnessing water through the use of dams, aerial chemical trails to shift weather patterns), mutual appreciation and relationship with all that lives began to diminish. Those embracing the new ways gradually shifted from eco-mindfulness to ego-mindedness. What Western society embraced as evolution and advancement, the natural world experienced as loss via extinction, polluted waterways, and deforestation (Killingsworth & Bao, 2015).

Western ways of knowing and interacting amongst humans followed a similar devolutionary trajectory of ego and disconnection until the mid-1970s, when the conception of another way of knowing – a way of knowing similar to indigenous teachings began to recognize the healing capacity of connection (Miller, 1976). Relational-Cultural Theory was birthed from ideas generated by Jean Baker Miller’s Toward a New Psychology of Women (1976) and further nurtured through collaboration with Jordan, Stiver, and Surrey (Comstock et al., 2008). Upon maturation, RCT embraced feminist ideals that challenged the separate self model by positing that through affiliation (connection), mutuality (power with), and authenticity, individuals thrive.
Miller and Stiver (1997) broadened awareness regarding the impact of growth fostering relationships by further delineating the benefits of affiliation via the 5 Good Things (zest, sense of worth, clarity, productivity, and a desire for more connection). Banks (2011) augmented RCTs psychosocial model by including the science of connection through summarizing research in the neurosciences and concluding that humans truly are hard-wired to connect. Norton (2009) on the other hand is the first to introduce RCT as a frame for including the natural world by bridging ecopsychology and social work approaches. Norton (2012) furthers the support of RCT and the environment by proposing an eco-social approach, which recognizes feminist thought and anti-oppressive approaches.

This scholarship augments Norton (2009) by acknowledging the role of Indigenous teachings on relationship and expanding natural rights as human rights. By integrating Indigenous teachings and theoretical tenets of RCT, it is the intent of this author to provide increased coherence to understanding the role of the natural environment in early social work. The author through the banded dissertation hopes to provide further language and tools for the profession to move forward in advancing its role in collaborating with the environment for personal and planetary healing.

**Summary of Scholarship Products**

The goal of this scholarship is to highlight the knowledge and wisdom that history brings to ameliorating the *wound* between many humans and the natural environment by turning to Indigenous teachings and early social work for guidance. Another focus of this work is to synthesize Indigenous and RCT tenets to further the profession’s commitment to the natural world. This banded dissertation is comprised of three works including a conceptual framework, historical research, and a practical model that address the present imbalance and fractured relationship between humans and the environment. The first product is a conceptual piece that
encourages the profession to embrace natural rights as human rights by accessing the knowledge and wisdom of Indigenous teachings and RCT. The second piece is exploratory archival research examining social work’s beginnings in the settlement house movement for direction on the profession’s next steps with the natural world. The final work is a presentation that joins Indigenous wisdom with Western approaches. The product proposes a theoretical and practice model that encourages humanity to return to the beginning, a place of mutual respect, resonance, and healthy relationship among and between all of Earth’s inhabitants.

Discussion

Social work has been defending its viability as a profession since Flexner’s presentation at the National Conference of Charities and Corrections (1915). There is no question what social work is – a relational holistically trained systems profession gifted with the ability to weave information from other disciplines to address disparities at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. Social work needs to claim its role as a relational profession that has incorporated information from all ways of knowing. It is time to make more than ripples through an anthropocentric approach. The profession must move beyond contemplative words and take concrete actions by adopting a paradigm that equates human and natural rights, improving engagement with those we have borrowed from (Indigenous, biological, natural, and social sciences), claiming its identity, and helping mend relationships for and among all of life.

Implications for Education

This work furthers the scholarship of social work education by providing the theoretical reasoning and methods for incorporating the natural world into its curriculum. By accessing Indigenous teachings and RCT tenets, social work can move forward with a framework to assuage the impacts of climate change on the world’s most vulnerable – human’s and the environment.
**Practice Possibilities**

This research yielded a synthesized approach of Indigenous and Western knowledge to engage micro, mezzo, and macro level practitioners in healing human and environmental maladies. The research findings indicate that social work would be returning to its roots by truly utilizing a person *and* environment perspective that incorporates knowledge of the natural world into assessment, intervention, and treatment strategies.

**Future Research**

By formally integrating the natural world into social work’s purview, the profession is provided with the means and opportunity to participate in interdisciplinary research examining the intersection of relational disconnection of humans from and on the natural world. At present, this author is working with the Minnesota Department of Health to assess mental health professionals’ awareness of solastalgia (dis-ease by witnessing impacts of climate change to one’s *home*; Albrecht, 2010) and its impact on human mental, emotional, and physical health. Solastalgia crosses the social and natural sciences. This research is an impetus for social work to be at the table with the natural sciences and move toward a joint solution to climate change impacts on humans and the environment.


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Redefining Relationships in Social Work: People and the Natural Environment

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Author Note

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Abstract

Relationship is the hallmark of health for Aki - Earth, humanity, and all that lives. The social work profession has begun to acknowledge the intersection of the natural world and human wellness. This conceptual paper addresses how social work should move forward with full inclusion of the natural environment in its professional scope of practice. The paper will review the history of disconnection between humans and the environment, apply Indigenous knowledge and Relational-Cultural Theory (RCT) to define social work’s role with the natural environment, reframe environmental rights as human rights, and propose additional direction for social work education and practice. To illustrate the depth of connection between humans and the natural world, Indigenous and RCT tenets will be applied to humans’ relationship with the environment. The conceptual product aspires to spur further recognition and responsibility by the social work profession in claiming its role as a partner with the natural world in both personal and planetary healing.

*Keywords*: environmental rights, Indigenous knowledge, natural environment, relational-cultural theory, social work, solastalgia
Redefining Relationships in Social Work: People and the Natural Environment

Over recent decades, the profession of social work has begun to understand and incorporate the relevance of the natural environment into research, professional standards, and higher education. Joining the fields of ecology and ecopsychology, social work scholarship has started encouraging the profession’s responsibility to people and the planet (Besthorn, 2012; Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Boetto, 2017; Coates, 2003; McKinnon, 2008; Miller & Hayward, 2014; Norton, 2009; Zapf, 2010). The International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW), International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW), and International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW; 2012] outlined a global agenda that includes “promoting sustainable communities and environmentally sensitive development” (p. 5). This global agenda commits to protecting the natural environment insofar as it relates to human safety and security. The importance of the natural environment is alluded to peripherally in Ethical Standard 6.01 on Social Welfare in The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers [NASW, 2017]. Ethical Standard 6.01 states, “Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments” (p. 29).

In 2015, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) released the latest Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), which require Baccalaureate and Master’s in Social Work programs to meet competencies related to environmental justice. Competency 3 of the 2015 EPAS focuses on the potential impact of the environment on humans, instead of the mutual interdependence of each. The Grand Challenges for Social Work were outlined that same year by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare [AASWSW, 2015]. One of the Grand Challenges includes the impetus to “create social responses to a changing environment” (AASWSW, 2015, p. 2; AASWSW, 2019). Though there is increased momentum espousing the
importance of the natural environment and its impact on humanity, a foundational theory has not yet been adopted by the social work profession (Kemp, 2011).

Before social work moves forward with fostering this evolving role in theory and practice, the profession needs to define and outline its relationship with the natural world. Relationship is defined in this article as connection and the interchange of energy via verbal and nonverbal means between two or more life forms. For the purpose of this paper, the natural world/environment includes Aki - Earth and all that lives: Nibi -water, rooted relatives, four-leggeds, swimmers, crawlers, and fliers. The present understanding of the natural environment must shift from an objectified system that humanity utilizes to survive, to an active relational partner for all to thrive. In an effort to redefine social work’s relationship with the natural world, it is essential to acknowledge and include the natural environment as a collaborator and client system worthy of recognition and support.

In a profession dedicated to serving those marginalized by people and power structures, social work has left behind some of the most vulnerable inhabitants on this planet – the natural world (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Gray & Coates, 2012). Social work has succumbed to Western operational definitions of what is considered life by adopting an anthropocentric worldview addressing only those at the top of the food chain: humans (Coates, 2003; Gray & Coates, 2012). It is critical to broaden what social work defines as life deemed worthy of advocacy, empowerment, and protection by incorporating the natural world into who, what, and how we serve as a profession (Gray & Coates, 2015). Through synthesizing Indigenous wisdom and RCT by incorporating the role of relationship and connection, along with broadening social work’s practice to include environmental rights, the profession can move toward a model that equally values and supports the wellbeing of people and the environment.

**Relationship and the Role of Connection**
Each semester, Andrew Favorite, Gaawaabaabiganikaag (White Earth) Elder, reminded the diverse student body at White Earth Tribal and Community College, “We are all Indigenous to somewhere” (personal communication, Fall 2007). Professor Favorite was purposeful in creating connections within the classroom, community, and all that lives on Turtle Island (North America) and beyond. Relationship is inherent to interactions between Indigenous peoples and the environment (Deloria, 1999; Johnston, 2004). Pre-history suggests that at one time, all of humanity was one with creation (Lenski, 1984). Humans learned from the environment through sensory engagement, mindful curiosity, prayer, and practicing the basic principle of reciprocity. There was intentionality and balance with the natural world (Peacock & Wisuri, 2001).

The Disconnect: A Relational Shift between People and the Planet

A gradual transformation in the degree of connectedness and type of relationship took place between some human groups and the natural world. According to Lenski’s Critical Theory (1984), as humans gained power over life forms through domestication of animals and corralled plant propagation, mutual appreciation and relationship with the natural world diminished. The onset of technological advancements and expanded free time for humans to follow pre-frontal cortical musings, further divided humans and the natural world. For those in the West, there was a shift in relationship and priorities from eco-mindfulness, interconnectedness, and biocentrism to ego-mindedness, individualism, and domination. What Western society embraced as evolution and advancement, manifested as loss for the natural world through extinction of winged, crawlers, four-leggeds, swimming relatives, polluted waterways and deforestation (Killingsworth & Bao, 2015; Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010).

The human groups that have distanced themselves from the environment did so over time by objectifying the natural world, forgetting original connections, and dismissing natural relationships that date back to humanity’s beginnings (Lenski, 1984; Johnston, 2004). Humans
NATURAL CONNECTIONS: SOCIAL WORK’S ROLE

provided justification for exploitation of the environment by gradually disconnecting from the
environment and creating a hierarchical, power-over relationship with the natural world.
Through this process, dominant society assigned less qualitative worth to water, land, plants,
trees, and wildlife and moved forward with treating the natural world as an economic
commodity.

As Indigenous peoples have known throughout millennia and Western science now
attests, all of life is mutually reliant and interconnected (Deloria, 1999; Johnston, 2004;
Killingsworth & Bao, 2015). What touches the smallest of lives ripples and disrupts other
members of the ecosystem. For example, mindless application of herbicide and pesticides
threatens not only bees as pollinators, but also the plants, trees, wildlife, and humans that rely on
one another for survival. Most, if not all that inhabit Earth, have experienced the detrimental
impact of humanity’s impaired relationship with the natural world (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010).
Assault on the natural world impacts all of life, including humanity. The social work profession
would benefit both people and the natural environment, by broadening its focus to embrace
everyone and every living thing touched by the hands of oppression.

The unhealthy relationship between humanity and Earth has metamorphosed in a
direction that counters life and wellbeing. Louv (2008) synthesized research related to the
estrangement of today’s children from the natural world. Mental health maladies, such as
depression and anxiety, continue to climb as humanity further distances itself from the natural
disconnection has negatively affected personal and planetary health. The present relationship
between most humans and the natural environment is dysfunctional at best and represents the
depth and breadth of disconnection needing repair and restoration in order to heal. Social work is
aptly positioned with its cross disciplinary approach to aide in bridging the relationship between
humans and the natural world to restore connections that cultivate health and wellbeing for all that lives.

Indigenous peoples continue to foster relationship with Aki – Earth, despite Western settler’s attempts at assimilation (Smith, 2012). The rest of humanity needs to remember and recover its connection with the environment by recognizing relationship with the natural world is vital for all that inhabit Earth. Social work is situated with the values and skills to assist in repairing the systemic rift between humans and the environment. To effectively do so, the profession needs to consider adjusting its worldview and equally include the natural environment in its scope of practice. Social work can turn to the foundational knowledge laid by Indigenous wisdom and Relational-Cultural Theory in its journey toward relational repair and true inclusivity.

**Relational-Cultural Theory: Honoring Indigenous Wisdom**

Though the idea of *relationship* as paramount to personal wellbeing is a newcomer to the social sciences (Miller, 1976), it is part of age-old traditional practices of Indigenous peoples worldwide. Indigenous teachings recognize the import of human relationships and value connection with all that lives (Deloria, 1999; Johnston, 2004; Peacock & Wisuri, 2001). Within the last few decades, western science has recognized the reality that nature is nurturing and necessary for human health and wellness (Heinsch, 2011; Howard et al., 2017). RCT embraces ideas similar to Indigenous teachings - that humans need relationship, and relationships between individuals or systems can be either mutually beneficial or depleting.

RCT was birthed from ideas generated by Jean Baker Miller’s work *Toward a new psychology of women* (1976). This relational approach that fosters wellbeing was further nurtured through collaboration with Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver, and Janet Surrey (Comstock et al., 2008). The founding mothers of RCT offered an alternative feminist theory to the dominant
paradigm in psychology that espoused “power over” dynamics and emphasized autonomy in the therapeutic process (West, 2005). RCT challenged the separate self model by positing that through affiliation (connection), mutuality (power with), and authenticity, people thrive. Miller and Stiver (1997), broadened awareness regarding the impact of growth fostering relationships by further delineating the benefits of relationship via *The 5 Good Things*. Later, Banks (2011) augmented RCT's psychosocial model by including “the science of connection” through summarizing research in the neurosciences that humans truly are hard-wired to connect (Banks & Hirschman, 2015; Siegel, 2012).

RCT makes the following assumptions: it is through growth-fostering relationship that persons heal and thrive (Miller & Stiver, 1997) and humans are hard-wired to connect (Banks, 2011). Miller and Stiver (1997) review the impact of affiliation by claiming that *The 5 Good Things* happen in growth fostering relationships. A growth fostering relationship fosters *authenticity*, honors *mutuality* between people, and strives to establish *power with* versus a power over connection. When relationship fosters growth, *The 5 Good Things* naturally happen: zest, sense of worth, clarity, productivity, and a desire for more connection.

Humans are mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually wired to connect to the natural world (Howard et al., 2017). Indigenous peoples recognize the sacred relationship with water and honor “Her” with feasts, prayers, and ceremony (Johnston, 1992). Due to the fact that an adult body is composed of 70% water, Emoto (2005) concludes, *We are Water*, which is synonymous with Indigenous teachings that *Water is Life*. Applying RCT’s tenets to human interaction with the environment may help translate Indigenous teachings in a manner palpable to social work, warranting nature’s inclusion as a system encompassed and served by the profession.

**Relational-Cultural Theory and the Environment: A Natural Connection**
There are numerous ways to illustrate the natural connection between Indigenous knowledge, RCT, social work, and all that lives. For example, Nibi - water shares in acknowledging the essence of the feminine, as well as nurtures the Five Good Things (zest, sense of worth, clarity, productivity, and a desire for more connection) in relationship with humankind (Prussia, 2017). According to Anishinaabe teachings, women are caretakers of Nibi – water, based on their relationship with and role as givers of life, birthing spirits through the maternal waters from the unseen to the physical world. Josephine Mandamin, Anishinaabekwe, notes, “We as women are life-givers, protectors of the water…” (Gursoz, 2014, para. 6).

Similar to social work, RCT’s perspective holds space for qualitative ways of knowing, which are inherently relational and descriptive in its process. RCT’s premise posits that health is incumbent upon growth-fostering relationships (Jordan, 2001). The essence of water is in and of itself relational, as it is composed of two elements that need affiliation with one another to be. Without hydrogen, water does not exist. In the absence of oxygen, water cannot take on its full being. For survival of the lifeblood fundamental to all that lives (water), relationship is essential. The Five Good Things, hallmarks of RCT, describe the yield of healthy relationship (Miller & Stiver, 1997). Each of the Five Good Things or relational gifts are considered here in the context of humans’ connection with the environment to provide the foundational support for inclusion of the natural world in social work’s professional realm.

Zest is described as the vitality and energy one feels in a mutually growth fostering relationship (Miller, 1986). Humans’ connection with water, trees, plant and animal life is invigorating and restorative. One can observe zestful interactions by going to the lakes, oceans, gardens and forests where families congregate to energize. Zest is the cumulative content of positive exchange between humans and the natural world. Not only are humans energized by the
connection, water and rooted relatives mirror the zest-filled response (Kimmerer, 2013; Nichols, 2014).

According to Miller (1986), a sense of worth is developed through an interchange where attention and recognition are conveyed. One cannot know thyself if alienated from the systems that surround her/him/them; a sense of worth is derived through relationship. Humans learn who and how they are through engagement with the environment. Humans can be found connecting with the natural environment via gardening, playing outside, resting under trees, watching birds and more. This positive intentional exchange often fosters pleasure and personal growth (Alcock et al., 2014).

Clarity or fuller knowledge of one’s self transpires through relationship (Miller, 1986). As Indigenous knowledge has shared and Western ways of knowing now document, Water is Life – We are Water. As humans take time for reflection with water or trees, a greater understanding of self, humanity, and the whole is gained. Returning to relationship with the environment is critical and social work would benefit by incorporating this truth and expanding its mission to serve all of the vulnerable and oppressed (NASW, 2017), including the natural world.

Action or productivity is another gift of relationship (Miller, 1986). As one hydrates with the basic nourishment that water provides, the liquid supplement energizes the physical organs and increases mental sharpness of the human vessel improving engagement in life. The same is realized each Spring, as the lifeblood (water - sap) moves through trees from earth bound root systems forging up the trunk into the branches creating the conditions for further growth and reproduction. A byproduct of the trees’ sap is sustenance in the form of maple/birch syrup once water is boiled down. The process of gathering sap to produce syrup requires energy, which leads to another cyclical relational exchange between water, trees, and humans (Prussia, 2017). Humans’ relational exchange with the natural world was initially mutual. Sadly, the Earth and
Inhabitants have experienced the unhealthy impact of disconnection during the last few centuries. Exploration of how to acknowledge, reconnect, and collaborate with the natural environment is an invaluable endeavor for the profession, as it supports present efforts to ameliorate disparities at the micro, mezzo, and macro intersections for all of life.

Miller (1986) believes that “increased ‘zest’, empowerment, knowledge and worth...leads to the desire for more and fuller connection...” (p. 7). Water is central to human mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual wellbeing and is actively sought by way of springs, rivers, lakes, and oceans (Nichols, 2014). The significance that Nibi – water holds in the most sacred of ceremonies (e.g. Japanese Shinto practices, Indigenous Sweat Lodges, Christianity) is indicative of the relational magnitude it holds for humans. Emoto (2005) writes, “the more you know about water, the more clearly you will see yourself. As you become clearer, you will see the society, the nation, the world, the earth, the universe, and eventually the divine being” (p. xii). The environmental relational truths provide the catalyst for social work to shift its lens, become more inclusive in its scope, and embrace the natural world. It is time for social work to expand its professional purview, provide voice for the voiceless, and serve both humans and the natural environment.

In 2016, at the Transforming Community Conference in Duluth, MN, Dr. Judith Jordan (a founding RCT scholar), shared “We need relationships like we need air and water...” On October 24, 2017, this author interviewed Dr. Jordan about RCT’s potential application with the natural environment. Dr. Jordan responded that it is important to conceptualize mutuality between humans and the environment. She indicated that the collective we must move from a place of domination and power over to power with every being, which includes mutual empathy with all of life. Dr. Jordan further shared, “we are at a global crisis point and need to acknowledge our impact on the Earth” (personal communication, October 24, 2017). RCT is
both a developmental psychological theory and a research-based therapeutic approach that provides understanding of the “why’s” of behavior and the “how to” address the behavior (Jordan, 2009). Paired with Indigenous knowledge, RCT offers an empathic theoretical model that could assist and guide the social work profession with full inclusion of the natural environment.

**Current Status of the Natural World in Social Work**

The road to social work’s inclusion of the natural environment in its professional and educational mandates is relatively recent (CSWE, 2015). Social work has broached environmental inclusion under the auspices of sustainability. Brennan (2009) outlines varying definitions for sustainability as the concept relates to social work. Coates’ (2003) definition of sustainability includes the interchange of economic, social and environmental wellbeing. Another definition applicable to the profession emphasizes the interconnectedness of humans and the natural world (Brennan, 2009). Mary (2008) describes sustainability as “conditions that must be attained to ensure the continuation of all life on the planet: human survival, biodiversity, equity, and life quality … sustainability means living in harmony with fellow humankind, bird, beast, air, land, sky, and sea” (p. 33). Some social work scholars recognize the relationship between humans and the natural world beyond that of sustainability and have started molding another narrative for social work (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Gray & Coates, 2012; Norton, 2009). This narrative is similar to Indigenous teachings and shifts the professional discussion from an anthropocentric approach to environmental justice, to one that includes care and concern for the natural world as an active collaborator deserving of advocacy similar to humans.

Besthorn and Saleebey (2003) support expanding social work’s definition of *environment* to include the natural world. Besthorn and Saleebey (2003) ground the argument in Wilson’s biophilia theory (1984), which posits humans have an innate or genetic predisposition to connect
with the natural environment. The authors outline the relationship between core social work values and biophilic principles. Based on the inextricable link between humans and the natural environment, the authors make a strong argument for the profession to include the natural environment in the definition and application of the “ecological” model. McKinnon (2008) echoes Besthorn and Saleebey’s (2003) sentiments regarding the inclusion of the natural environment in social work’s ecological approach. McKinnon (2008) illustrates this connection by describing the cyclical impact of humans on the environment that has resulted in climate change and in turn affects all that inhabit Earth.

Gray and Coates (2012) argue that the social work profession needs to support both humans and the natural world. The authors elucidate on the interconnectedness of environmental and social injustice by asking ethical questions that lead the reader to ask, why not? Gray and Coates (2012) propose environmental ethics that borrow from deep ecology, ecofeminism, environmental pragmatism, and social constructionism that furthers the argument for social work’s future to encompass addressing environmental impacts on marginalized populations including the natural world. Miller, Hayward, and Shaw’s (2011) summation mirrors Gray and Coates (2012), encouraging the profession to remove the artificial wall that separates humans and the natural world. Miller, Hayward, and Shaw (2011) suggest changing the definitional barriers that limit the profession in its service to the natural world by applying the Seventeen (17) Principles of Environmental Justice; a framework that will empower “environmentally sustainable social work practice” (p. 273).

Norton (2009) is the first to introduce RCT as a frame for including the natural world by bridging ecopsychology and social work approaches. Norton’s article (2009) outlines social work’s history of vacillating between micro level psychoanalytic leanings and mezzo/macro social justice activism through the person-in-environment model. Norton (2009) describes how
RCT has the capacity to hold space for both humans and the environment by re-conceptualizing RCT’s *The 5 Good Things*. Norton (2012) furthers the argument of RCT and the environment by proposing an eco-social approach, which recognizes feminist thought and anti-oppressive approaches. Norton’s works (2009, 2012) suggest next steps on how to utilize RCT to integrate the natural world at the micro, mezzo, and macro levels. This conceptual paper builds on Norton’s work (2009) by acknowledging the role of Indigenous teachings on relationship and expanding natural rights as human rights.

**Direction for Personal and Planetary Healing: Next Steps for Social Work**

Social work has and still does define its relationship with the natural world through a Western paradigmatic lens. It has adopted an anthropocentric approach to how the profession views and interacts with the natural environment. It is time for social work to step out of the system of power over and oppression – a model that supports exploitation, annihilation, and the bottom-line, and return to the worldview that honors Aki - Earth and all she freely shares. Incorporating Indigenous teachings and Relational-Cultural tenets will provide the profession with a foundational lens that supports social work in expanding services to people and the environment (Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2007; Norton, 2009; Norton, 2012). A relational approach that holds the natural environment’s livelihood as important as human wellbeing is more inclusive and a better fit with a profession charged with addressing all impacted by oppression and injustice.

**Redefining the Profession’s Relationship with the Natural World**

Anisimov and Ryzhenkov (2016) trace the beginning development of natural or environmental human rights to the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in 1972. The Declaration on the Human Environment, Declaration of Principles and Action (Stockholm Declaration) was a product of this conference. The Stockholm Declaration
recognized the negative influence of human development and economic growth on the environment that in turn negatively impacted the international community. Fast forward 30 years, in 2005, the Inuit of the Arctic filed a petition against the United States seeking reparation for greenhouse gas emissions negatively impacting their human rights including: safe travel, property damage, and health caused by ice melt. From the onset, natural rights have been overshadowed by human rights and treated as secondary and a nuisance to human development and livelihood.

*Rights of Nature and Mother Earth*, a web publication by Movement Rights, Indigenous Environmental Network (IEN), and Women’s Earth and Climate Action Network International (WECAN) consolidate arguments for supporting rights of the natural world (Biggs, Lake, & Goldtooth, n.d.). The rationale returns to Indigenous teachings that posit we are related to everything in the natural world. According to Biggs, Lake, and Goldtooth (n.d.), “we cannot separate ourselves from the water we drink, the food we eat or the air we breathe any more than we can care for just a single leaf on a tree…we are nature” (p. 3).

As discussed, the collective *We* is not currently in relationship, nor does it recognize mutuality with water or the natural world. LaDuke (2016) outlines the effects of war waged on water by citing the decimation of the Rio Doco (Brazil), Animas River (Colorado), and the Frazier River (British Columbia), along with the collateral effects to systems reliant on this source of life. The Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) presently threatens the health of the Missouri River, the *lifeblood* for the Lakota at Standing Rock, along with 8 million people and plant/animal life downstream. Lakota relatives have brought awareness to the world stage about the dire need for humans to acknowledge and engage in relationship with Water – *Mni Wiconi* (Water is Life).
The Ho-Chunk Nation in Wisconsin is the first tribe in the United States to advance the rights of nature (Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund [CELF], 2016). The amendment states, “ecosystems and natural communities within the Ho-Chunk territory possess an inherent, fundamental, and inalienable right to exist and thrive” (CELF, 2016, para. 2). The Maori Tribe gained legal human rights for their relative, the Whanganui River in New Zealand in 2017. According to the new legal status of the Whanganui River, there is “no differentiation between harming the tribe or harming the river because they are one and the same” (The Guardian, 2017, para. 6). At the end of 2018, the White Earth Ojibwe in Minnesota granted legal rights to Manoomin – wild rice, becoming the first nation to recognize rights for a member of the plant nation. According to the new law, wild rice “possesses inherent rights to exist, flourish, regenerate, and evolve, as well as inherent rights to restoration, recovery, and preservation” (LaDuke, 2019, para. 3). Social work needs to examine broadening its service dimensions to include natural rights as human rights and mirror the values and actions of the Ho-Chunk, Maori, and White Earth Ojibwe. By returning to humanity’s beginnings and remembering, recognizing, and relating to the natural world as family – that “we are nature” (Biggs, Lake, and Goldtooth, n.d., p. 3), the social work profession can no longer deny its inherent responsibility to people and the planet.

**Ethical standards.** Values drive the application of knowledge and skills taught and practiced in a profession. The NASW Code of Ethics (2017) guides social work in its purpose and processes. Currently, the Code of Ethics (2017) mission is to “enhance human well-being…with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty” (p. 1). Through reconnection with the natural world and redefining the profession’s relationship with the environment, NASW’s mission and values could be translated to encompass *all* that lives. Rather than enhancing only human wellbeing, the
profession could work to enhance the life of all beings: vulnerable (Aki – Earth and Nibi – water under constant threat of slow poisoning and death), oppressed (plant life exploited for material gain), and living in poverty (polar bears’ loss of habitat). The natural and human world is intimately intertwined. By embracing Indigenous teachings and recognizing environmental and human rights, the profession can truly serve, challenge injustice, acknowledge the dignity and worth of all that lives, value every relationship, and work with integrity and competence by understanding and serving all of the inhabitants on and of this world.

**Academic touchstones.** Professional mission, vision, and values impact the content required in academic curriculum. CSWE, through revision of it Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2015), has made a beginning gesture toward environmental inclusion in social work classrooms by mandating students learn to “advance human rights and social, economic and environmental justice” (p. 7, Competency 3). This competency could be changed from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric focus that recognizes the circular and mutual interdependence of humans and the natural world.

There are a couple of social work texts already published that subscribe to this enlarged worldview and offer a more inclusive pedagogical approach. Coates (2003) *Ecology and social work: Toward a new paradigm* and Gray, Coates, and Heatherington’s (2013) *Environmental social work* share how the profession can collaborate with the natural world as a vital and equally recognized partner. Indigenous and Relational-Cultural theoretical tenets should be added to these approaches as a way to fully thread traditional and western ways of knowing into a blanket that fully covers the profession’s impetus to engage and protect all of the vulnerable including the natural world from the hands of oppression.

**Practice aspirations.** Social work is known for integrating information and knowledge from various fields to provide holistic services untethered from restrictive silos. Since
conception, social work has grown with a flexibility that has enabled it to be a true systems’ profession, one with the knowledge and skills to work with diverse individuals, groups, and settings. The profession can further envelope this fluidity by expanding service provision to include the natural world. For example, this author teaches an environmental social work course that shares how to fully embrace the natural environment in macro, mezzo, and micro practice. The course provides students with an Indigenous and Relational-Cultural theoretical foundation as rationale for MSW students to care, connect, and collaborate with the natural world. Assignments challenge students how to envision cooperating with the natural sciences to address human impact on the environment, along with ways to ease malaise and solastalgia (place based distress from lived experience of unwelcome environmental change; Albrecht, 2010) by increasing human engagement with the natural world. Indigenous teachings, along with Polyvagal and Relational-Cultural theories, provide a foundational understanding for students on how to collaborate with the natural environment in the healing process by applying somatic literacy skills. Somatic literacy is a bottom-up clinical approach based on Peter Levine’s work that engages the body and mind in wellness restoration (Levine, 2010). The practice focuses on accessing sensation and tapping into the body’s innate ability to heal itself by allowing it to complete unfinished self-protective responses. Students are taught basic somatic literacy skills that involve honoring the innate health of biological systems and collaborating with the natural world to aid in personal and planetary healing. Through recognizing the importance and mutual reliance of all of life and engaging appropriate theories and practice, the profession may more effectively address oppressive systems that impact humans and the natural world.

It is time to incorporate and embrace the wisdom of Indigenous teachings and place value on all that lives by redefining social work’s relationship with the environment. The natural next step for social work is to define environmental rights as human rights and incorporate Indigenous
wisdom and Relational-Cultural tenets as a theoretical and practice approach to aide in mending relationships between humans and the environment. Nature is nurturing; we are nature. Therefore, we must nurture this beautiful, complex, and inseparable relationship and orient the social work profession toward serving people and the planet to ensure wellness for all.
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Early Social Work and the Natural Environment: A Relational-Cultural Approach

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UNAVAILABLE UNTIL JUNE 1, 2021
Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

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Doctorate in Social Work Program

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Author Note

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Abstract

Environmental wellbeing depends upon health of individuals and the natural world. This poster presentation shares a conceptual framework combining Indigenous wisdom and Western knowledge to suggest how to heal self and the environment. It is hoped that personal recovery through relationship and connection comes full circle to contribute to planetary healing.

*Keywords:* Indigenous wisdom, natural environment, relational-cultural theory, somatic literacy
Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

Indigenous teachings have acknowledged the importance of interconnection and balance among the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual aspects of self and the natural environment for thousands of years (Johnston, 2004; Peacock & Wisuri, 2009). With the gradual growth of agrarian practices, domestication of animals, the industrial revolution, advancements in technology (Lenski, 1984), and birth of the worldwide web, many have forgotten their inherent relationship with all that lives. This includes the relationship of the body, mind, and spirit, relationship with one another, and our deep connection with Aki - Earth, Nibi - water, the four-leggeds, swimmers, crawlers, fliers, and rooted relatives (Prussia, 2017).

Chronic relational disconnection has negatively affected personal and planetary health. The present relationship between most humans and the natural environment is dysfunctional at best and represents the depth and breadth of disconnection needing repair and restoration in order to heal. This disconnection has been linked to mental, emotional, physical, spiritual, and environmental ailments (Alcock, White, Wheeler, Fleming, & Depledge, 2014; Killingsworth & Bao, 2015; Louv, 2008; Zalasiewicz, Williams, Steffen, & Crutzen, 2010). Western science has recently started to acknowledge the fundamental reality that balance, both internally and externally, requires recognition of relationship (Miller, 1986) and that nature is nurturing and necessary for human health and wellness (Howard et al., 2017). Whereas Indigenous wisdom has always recognized that “we are nature” (Biggs, Lake, & Goldtooth, n.d., p. 3). Relational-Cultural Theory espouses ideas similar to Indigenous teachings - that humans need relationship, and relationships between individuals or systems can be either mutually beneficial or depleting (Miller, 1976; Miller & Stiver, 1997; Jordan, 2001).

An individual’s inherent ability to attune with natural bodily rhythms is vital for wellness. The development of somatic literacy teaches an individual to read the body’s cues and honor its
innate wisdom (Levine, 2010). This presentation provides a brief historical overview of the separation between mind and body, between humans and the environment, and offers insights about the current state of each. Teachings and basic tenets from Indigenous wisdom (Johnston, 2004; Peacock & Wisuri, 2009), Relational-Cultural (Jordan, 2001) and Polyvagal (Porges, 1995) theories, and somatic literacy skills (Levine, 2010; Payne, Levine & Crane-Godreau, 2015) that help psychological, physiological, and spiritual systems harmonize in healing are woven throughout the conceptual framework. The presenter also shares ways of collaborating with the natural environment in the treatment process with the belief that personal recovery through relationship will come full circle and contribute to necessary planetary healing.
References


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NATURAL CONNECTIONS: SOCIAL WORK’S ROLE

Relationship and the Healing Process: Collaboration with the Natural Environment

Leah Prussia, MSW, LICSW

Original Connections

“We are all indigenous to somewhere.”
-Andrew Favorite, White Earth Elder

Indigenous Wisdom
Reverence for Earth (Aki)
Relationship with All that Lives
Mutual Respect
Balance

Medicine Wheel

SPIRITUAL
MENTAL
EMOTIONAL
PHYSICAL

Disconnection

Mind - Body
Isolation
Depression
Addiction
Diabetes
Obesity

Humans - Natural World
Polluted Waterways
Decimation of Sacred Sites
Mining and Oil Extraction
Climate Change

Reconnection

“Relationship with nature is a formula for personal and planetary healing...”
-Leah Prussia

Somatic Literacy: A Tool for Reconnection

- Access Body’s Natural Rhythms
- Broaden Awareness of Interoception
- Elevate Mind and Body Cohesion
- Collaborate with the Natural World

Call to Action: Move toward relationship with self, others, and all that lives...

Return to Relationships

“We need relationships like air and water.”
-Dr. Judith Jordan

Relational - Cultural Theory: The 5 Good Things
1. Sense of Zest or Energy
2. Increased Sense of Worth
3. Clarity: Increased knowledge of oneself and the other person in the relationship
4. Productivity: Ability and motivation to take action both in the relationship and outside of it
5. Desire for more Connection: In response to satisfaction of relational experience

References and Acknowledgements

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