Critical Social Work
School of Social Work
University of Windsor
401 Sunset Avenue
Windsor, Ont.
Canada N9B 3P4
cswedit@uwindsor.ca

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Social Work and the Environment: Understanding People and Place

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Michael Kim Zapf  
University of Calgary

Abstract

As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on person-in-environment, social work might be expected to play a leadership role in interdisciplinary efforts to tackle environmental threats to human well-being and continued existence, yet the profession has generally been silent or less than relevant. This paper explores past and present neglect of the natural environment within mainstream social work. The profession’s longstanding person-in-environment perspective is examined for constraints that inhibit understanding of environmental issues and the development of effective strategies. Alternative understandings of the environment from specializations within the profession and related disciplines are considered. The paper concludes with directions toward new models of practice incorporating a view of people as place that may help us towards a broader mission of learning to live well in place.

Introduction

Human beings may be entering very difficult times with the degradation and potential destruction of our sustaining natural world. Collectively, we may be facing a fundamental shift in values and approaches towards living on and with this planet. Governments are beginning to respond. There are suggestions that society could be in the initial stages of constructing an environmental state much as we created the welfare state in the last century (Meadowcroft, 2007). What relevance does social work have as humankind faces these serious challenges? As a profession with a long-standing declared focus on person-in-environment, social work might be expected to play a leadership role in the planning stages of any new environmental state. Yet we have generally been silent on these serious threats to human well-being and continued existence.

How has the physical environment been perceived and conceptualized at the core and at the margins of the discipline of social work? To what extent have our foundational assessment and intervention strategies incorporated the physical environment? In what ways might our language, our assumptions, and our conventional knowledge-building approaches be limiting our ability to perceive connections between people and the world we inhabit? This paper attempts to address these important questions, and concludes that it is time (or past time) for social work to move beyond our conventional metaphor of person-in-environment towards a new paradigm, a new understanding of the relationship between people and the physical environment.
Morito (2002) clarified an important distinction between thinking about ecology and thinking ecologically. Ecological issues cannot be relegated to one separate discipline assigned exclusive responsibility for the physical environment. Ecological thinking is a process, a worldview, a set of principles, an awareness that must affect all approaches to enquiry and practice if we are to survive. Following Morito’s distinction, the following discussion is not about ecology from a social work perspective; rather, the emphasis is on the importance of our profession learning to think and act ecologically if we are to have relevance for addressing the serious environmental concerns now facing humankind.

How the Environment became the Social Environment

Laying the conceptual foundations for the new profession of social work, Mary Richmond (1922) acknowledged the physical environment as an important contextual consideration for practice but perceived its importance in terms of only its social aspects, asserting that the physical environment “becomes part of the social environment” to the extent that it “frequently has its social aspects” (p. 99). From the outset, the profession of social work was more comfortable using social science lenses to view the environment rather than perspectives from the physical or natural sciences. What happened later when the profession adopted an ecological perspective from the natural sciences? This ecological perspective was distorted to re-affirm the profession’s emphasis on the social environment. Consider Gordon’s (1969) work that called attention to social work’s newly declared “simultaneous dual focus on organism and environment” (p. 6), a statement of the ecological perspective perhaps in its purest form. Gordon, however, immediately went on to declare his assumption that the organism would be “interpreted by psychological theory” while the environment could be “interpreted by sociological and economic theory” (p. 6). Similar to Richmond’s work, here was another clear direction to understand the environment exclusively in social terms. Gordon (1981) later asserted that “the ultimate goal of social work is to bring about a balance between the realities of a person’s capabilities and a person’s social situation” (p. 136), with no mention of the physical environment at all.

Developing this ecological perspective into a functional systems approach for social work, Pincus and Minahan (1973) proposed four basic systems for practice, all of which were social (the change agent system; the client system; the target system; and the action system). From this systems perspective, “the focus of social work practice is on the interactions between people and systems in the social environment” (p. 3) with a goal of restoration of balance or equilibrium within immediate social systems where there had been some disruption. Considerations of the physical environment were beyond the scope of this approach. Building on these foundations, a pattern was established in the mainstream social work literature whereby the environment would be transformed into the social environment, with the physical environment disappearing altogether. No adequate rationale or explanation would be offered, and the switch was generally unnoticed or unacknowledged. Consider a few examples.

Yelaja (1985) presented the ecological metaphor as a major influence on social work with its emphasis on “the reciprocal relationships between the individual and the environment and the continuous adaptation of both person and environment to each other” (p. 29). Yet the very next sentence declared that “human growth and development constantly change in relation to the
social environment – and the social environment changes in response to human factors” (p. 29). Notice the switch. Within two sentences, the “environment” became the “social environment.” The physical environment had disappeared without explanation, effectively written out of the ecological equation.

Miley, O’Melia, and DuBois (2004) similarly set out a promising view of transactions between people and their environments, explaining how “people affect their environments and, likewise, the social and physical environment affects people” (p. 34). On the very same page, however, they reaffirmed “social work’s focus on social functioning” which they presented as the balance between coping efforts and the demands of the “social environment.” Once again, the physical environment was dropped without explanation.

Heinonen and Spearman (2006) explained that “the primary focus of social work should not be on psychological forces, the environment, or the social structure, but on the interface or relationship between the person and the social environment” (p. 182). In a single sentence, the triad of person, environment, and social structure became the duality of person and social environment. While this was an interesting and relatively quick instance of the familiar switch, arguably the most efficient example comes from a generalist practice textbook by Hull, Jr. and Kirst-Ashman (2004). Under the index entry for “Environment” (p. 483), it simply says “See Social Environment.” The physical environment was gone in only four words!

Not all social work authors left the physical environment completely behind. A minority declared the physical environment to be an integral component of their worldview and foundation for practice. Sadly, many of these pronouncements were quickly undercut by less than full support for the environment in subsequent applications. Ecological language is frequently used only as window dressing for conventional approaches that subsequently ignore the physical environment in their assessment tools and practice models. Once again, selected examples illustrate the pattern. Consider that Neugeboren’s (1996) book with the promising title *Environmental Practice in the Human Services* included only one paragraph (p. 251) that dealt directly with the physical environment, and this was completely focused on agency physical space (with mention made of lighting patterns, non-skid surfaces, safety features, and corridor length).

Even when the physical environment is presented conceptually as an important consideration for social work, it seldom makes the diagrammed practice model. Lehmann and Coady (2001) defined a client’s environment as “any aspect of the physical, social, and cultural environment, and what is most important will vary with individuals, time, and geography” (p. 72). The physical environment here was an integral component of the overall environment for social work practice and a potential variable influencing human activity. For some unexplained reason, however, the accompanying diagram of this ecological perspective labeled social and cultural contexts while completely ignoring the physical environment. Sheafor and Horejsi (2006) similarly defined the environment broadly as “one’s surroundings – that multitude of physical and social structures, forces, and processes that affect humans and all other life forms” (p. 9) but then made a distinction between the “immediate environment” defined in terms of social systems, and the “distant environment” which included features of “clean air, drinkable water, shelter, and good soil to produce food” (p. 9). For no apparent reason, nature was
relegated to the distance as background. Three pages later, the illustrated model of practice featured a background labeled only as “the social environment” (p. 12) with no mention whatsoever of the physical environment. From central to background to obscurity in three pages!

If the physical environment is consistently dropped from the diagrammed models of practice, it comes as no surprise that the assessment tools offered in mainstream practice textbooks concentrate primarily on aspects of social functioning, social networks, and social roles. The instruments, worksheets, and interview schedules offered for conducting person-in-environment assessments generally do not include elements of the physical environment (Compton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005; Garvin & Seabury, 1997; Gilgun, 2005; Poulin, 2005; Sheafor & Horejsi, 2006). Organizing data for an assessment using genograms and eco-maps limits the view to the social environment. There is little point declaring the natural world to be an integral part of a person’s environmental context if the assessment tools used are not capable of recognizing or incorporating these aspects.

Zastrow (2004) presented threats to the natural world and the associated quality of human life as falling within the scope of environmentalism but not social work. Perhaps this is the logical consequence of perceiving the environment as a social environment: social workers are concerned with the social environment while environmentalists are left to tackle issues of the natural environment. Of course, some social workers could also be environmentalists, but not necessarily. Returning to Morito’s (2002) terminology, this is an example of thinking about ecology rather than thinking ecologically.

**Reclaiming the Environment in Social Work**

Although relatively rare, there are instances in the literature of determined attempts to place environmental issues at the core of social work theory and practice. Nearly thirty years ago, Germain (1981) raised alarm that the profession was distorting the ecological perspective by leaving the physical environment unexplored “as a static setting in which human events and processes occur almost, if not entirely, independently of the qualities of their physical setting” (p. 104). She argued for understanding the physical environment in terms of both the natural world and the built world, further textured by the rhythms of time and considerations of spatial location. Writing at the same time, Weick (1981) also decried social work’s focus on human behaviour to the neglect of the physical environment. He proposed a dynamic matrix of internal and external environments necessary to understand and influence human behaviour.

Between 1992 and 1995, the NASW journal *Social Work* published four articles making a strong case for inclusion of the physical environment within the domain of social work. Describing the social work literature devoted to the physical environment as “sparse” (p. 391), Gutheil (1992) was concerned that this oversight could result in social workers’ neglect of physical surroundings when conducting assessments. The next year, Hoff and Polack (1993) considered human/environment interaction from the other side. Rather than looking at how the environment influences human activity, they emphasized “the human threat to environmental viability” (p. 208) which they argued had been ignored in the social work literature.
Later that year, Berger and Kelly (1993) also called for social work’s ecological model to be extended “to a full awareness of human’s role in biological as well as social ecosystems” (p. 524). Arguing that the foundation values of the profession would also need to be expanded to support this new direction, they developed a 12-point Ecological Credo for Social Workers (pp. 524-525). Two years later, Berger (1995) voiced the appeal once again in a provocative editorial that applied the label “Habitat Destruction Syndrome” to a global illness whereby “the human race is collectively engaged in practices that damage the environment and ensure our eventual self-destruction” (p. 441). The persuasive argument was that we have become desensitized to the threats to our environment and immobilized by a fear that the problem is too big for us to handle. Assuming that habitat destruction needs to be understood as the “greatest threat to our social welfare,” Berger again asked why we do not “add environmental activism to social work’s list of social welfare concerns” (p. 443).

In 1994, Hoff and McNutt published a book called The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work. Motivated by environmental threats facing humankind, the authors began with the premise that human and environmental welfare are “inextricably linked” (p. 2). Hoff and McNutt (1994) argued that social work and other professions will have to move beyond outdated goals of individual well-being and social welfare to adopt new models geared more towards sustainability and protection of the environment. This position received strong support in a subsequent policy statement from the National Association of Social Workers (2000):

Protecting people and the natural environment through sustainable development is arguably the fullest realization of the person-in-environment perspective. The compatibility of sustainable development and the person-in-environment perspective is a firm theoretical foundation from which to apply macrolevel social work practice to person-natural environment problems. (p. 105)

Gamble and Weil (1997) and Gorobets (2006) sought to put this notion of sustainable development at the core of community development theory and local development practice. Similar work from Finland promoted a new “Eco-social approach” for social work (Matthies, Nahri, & Ward, 2001; Narhi, 2004). In his book Ecology and Social Work: Toward a New Paradigm, Coates (2003) argued that the Western focus on the individual and competition has made us blind and indifferent to our connectedness with the natural world. His new paradigm calls for social work to become a major player in the transformation of society towards global consciousness and environmental well-being. Graham, Swift, and Delaney (2009) similarly placed the “environmental imperative” clearly at the top of the list of essential issues that will shape social policy into the 21st Century, observing that the profession of social work missed the boat by applying ecological theory only to issues of people and their social contexts. Centrality of the physical environment to macro level practice is given another boost in a recent textbook entitled Human Behavior and the Social Environment: Macro Level – Groups, Communities, and Organizations (vanWormer, Besthorn, & Keefe, 2007) which includes an entire chapter devoted to “Human Behavior and the Natural Environment: The Community of the Earth” (pp. 222-262). Here, in a mainstream social work textbook, are discussions of biodiversity, global warming, war, and consumerism presented as challenges to the planet and our profession.
Voices at the Margins of Social Work: Environment and Place

While notions of stewardship, sustainability, and place may be new to the mainstream profession, they have some standing at the margins of social work. Central to rural and remote practice is an understanding of context, of locality, of place and its powerful implications for human identity, activity, and problem-solving. In rural settings, a shared history and lifestyle leads to a rural identity rooted in a sense of belonging and a profound attachment to place (Collier, 2006; Ginsberg, 1998; Schmidt, 2005; Stuart, 2004; Zapf, 2002). How does this rural notion of “place” affect the practice of social work? Social work is not something created elsewhere and then done or imposed on rural or remote areas. It is created or made in each place (Cheers, 2004).

Much of the developing literature on spirituality and social work makes reference to Canda’s (1988) influential definition of spirituality as “the human quest for personal meaning and mutually fulfilling relationships among people, the non human environment, and, for some, God” (p. 243). Canda’s original broad notion of spirituality has frequently been narrowed in the social work literature to simply an internal quality or characteristic of the individual, again without adequate explanation (Zapf, 2005). A decade after contributing the foundation definition, Canda (1998) called for social work to revisit the person-in-environment concept “in a dramatic way” because the person is “not separable” (p. 103) from the natural environment. Canda and Furman (1999) further challenged the profession to reconsider "what is the whole person and what is the whole environment?" (p. 194).

Consistent with Canda’s (1988) broad definition of spirituality, deep ecology clearly rejects divisions between the human and nonhuman worlds, and suggests instead that human identity derives from an ecological consciousness. Rosenhek (2006) put it simply: “In a nutshell, the deep ecology movement reminds us that we are from the Earth, of the Earth and not separate from it” (p. 91). Deep ecology promotes harmony and connection among all forms of being, a mutual dependence rather than human domination of the natural world for economic gain. Diverse ecosystems have intrinsic value beyond their economic utility for extractable resources. As explained by Ungar (2002), “diversity, complexity, and symbiosis are in our own best interest” (p. 486). From the perspective of deep ecology, “social work practice needs to address the problems that arise from excessive and destructive human interference with nature” (van Wormer, Besthorn, & Keefe, 2007, p. 249).

In Western society, we tend to view the physical environment as separate from ourselves, as an objective thing, as a commodity to be developed or traded or wasted or exploited, as an economic unit, as property. The dominant Western worldview has been described as "hostile to nature" (Spretnak, 1991, p. 102) and antagonistic to any concept of personhood beyond individualism. In contrast, the foundation metaphor of Aboriginal traditional knowledge has been characterized in the literature as a perspective of “I am I and the Environment,” (Ortega y Gasset, 1985). Suopajarvi (1998) explained it this way: “I’m not in the place but the place is in me” (p. 3), similar to Cajete’s (2000) observation that “we are the universe and the universe is us” (p. 60). When inhabitants of a region have been there for many generations, their identity incorporates the place and their relationship to it. Through this process, Aboriginal cultural identities become tied “directly to the land and concepts of place" (McCormack, 1998, p. 28).
Graveline (1998) talked about a direct link between "geographical space and worldview" (p. 19). Cajete (2000) called this link "geopsyche" (p. 187) whereby people assume traits of a particular place they have occupied for a long time, and the place assumes human traits, in a continual process of co-creation.

From the field of international social work comes a global concept of environmental citizenship which is “motivated by principles of sustainability and sensitivity to the natural order” (Drover, 2000, p. 33) and serves as a link between social justice and ecology (Latta, 2007). Because protection of the environment requires collective action at the global level, the notion of global environmental citizenship pushes beyond individualism, nationalism, and the rights of one generation. The Brundtland Report (United Nations, 1987) offered a simple yet powerful definition of sustainable development as “development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (p. 43). An International Policy Statement on Globalisation and the Environment from the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2004) calls on individual social workers and their organizations to recognize

- the importance of the natural and built environment to the social environment, to develop environmental responsibility and care for the environment in social work practice and management today and for future generations, to work with other professionals to increase our knowledge and with community groups to develop advocacy skills and strategies to work towards a healthier environment and to ensure that environmental issues gain increased presence in social work education. (paragraph 15)

Voices from Other Disciplines: Expanded Notions of Place

Disciplines outside of social work offer intriguing perspectives and concepts from their experiences with interactions between people and the physical environment. From the world of art come visual expressions of encounters with physical landscapes and an historical record, preserved in visual images, of ways of thinking about the land (Evernden, 1985). The cinematic option of telling a place rather than telling a story challenges our cultural notions of place as mere scenery (Wenders, 2001). Music theorists explain the process of authoring space through narrativization, local performances, and expressions of local knowledge and rhythms (Whiteley, 2004). Music has also been connected with intentional movement through space through such processes as soundscapes, songlines, and musical pathways (Chatwin, 1987; Shelemay, 2001). Exploring the link between wine and place through the development of terroir wines, viticulture attempts to capture place value or somewhereness in a bottle (McGee & Patterson, 2007).

Environmental psychology has been actively exploring interrelationships between environments and human behaviour, with an emphasis on multidisciplinary efforts to understand the meaning of places (Bonnes & Bonaiuto, 2002). The discipline of sociology has been exploring an embodied sense of place, habitus, and the implications for local life opportunities (Hillier & Rooksby, 2005). Environmental design is involved with understanding place as a concept then applying this knowledge through active placemaking to create livable and sustainable communities (Architecture for Humanity, 2006). Mutual influences between people
and the planet are also a focus of study in human geography incorporating discussions of belonging, identity, and place attachment (Norton, 2004). Concepts of community allegiance and rootedness have led to approaches of place-based education, actively connecting students with local environmental and social issues. A concerned focus on people and place has given rise to a new vision of education for learning to live well in place, very different from the long-standing goal of achieving context-free credentials (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998; Orr, 1994).

Across these areas of study outside of social work, (particularly in the applied disciplines), three common themes are apparent. The first is an acceptance of place as a foundation concept that integrates human activity with the physical environment. The second is a vision of sustainability achieved through processes such as stewardship, earthkeeping, and living well in place. The third is a belief that multidisciplinary responses are needed to take on the challenges of the environmental crises we have created.

Language and Disfluency

In a highly personal essay on coping with a speech impediment (stuttering), Zalitak (2005) wrote of a pattern she called “disfluency.” In stressful situations when she was afraid that she would not be able to express clearly what she really wanted to say, she would fall back on old familiar patterns. Fear of failing, of stumbling, of looking incapable, all combined to cause her to retreat to her easy words and patterns instead of taking the risk to push forward with the difficult expression of new ideas. It could be argued that disfluency has been a pattern in social work when we have tried to speak or write in new ways about the physical environment but soon revert to old patterns and easy words (for example, limiting the environment to the social environment). Social work conferences can reinforce this disfluency by inviting papers on pre-determined familiar topics while at the same time establishing the language to be used in discussion. The words and expressions of our conventional academic discourse may not be adequate to capture some of the holistic notions of balance, belonging, and spirituality that arise when exploring relationships between people and the natural world.

The noun-based English language itself could be limiting our efforts to express connections with the natural environment. Aboriginal languages tend to be verb-based (Cajete, 2000; Witherspoon, 1977) expressing an active and continuing act of co-creation with the Earth. Social work seems to have difficulty incorporating this spiritual dimension in English language approaches to expressing the relationship between people and the environment. For example, Battiste and Henderson (2000) argued that the English term “nature” falls short of the Mi’kmaq expression kisu’lk mlkikno’tim which translates more as “creation place” (p. 77). The natural world is understood as constantly transforming, a realm that must be respected and experienced through connections and relationships rather than detached study. The healing approach of Colorado (1991) involved encountering clients at the Gii Lai, the “still quiet place” in English, and working there with the energies of the land. The Cree term pimatisiwin, translated by Hart (2002) as “the good life” and by Castellano (2006) as “being alive well”, involves observance of all nature and a reconnection with the land. McGaa (1990) offered the Lakota Sioux expression Mitakuye Oyasin to capture our relationship with all things. This sense of a great mystery that dwells in everything (active interrelationships and responsibilities between human beings and the natural world) has been conveyed through the Blackfoot term Ao’tsisstapitkyo’p (Bastien,
2004), the Navajo phrase *ho’zho’* (Cajete, 2000), and the Algonquian term *mntu* (Battiste and Henderson, 2000). All of these Aboriginal terms from the healing literature call out for an appreciation of the mystery and energies present everywhere in an ever changing natural environment.

Environmental/spiritual issues, possibly perceived as unscientific or difficult to categorize and use in practice, could be awkward for a profession seeking to improve its status as a legitimate evidence-based discipline. Ecological thinking is “wholistic, receptive, trustful, largely non-tampering, deeply grounded in aesthetic intuition” and guided by “the almost sensuous intuitions of natural harmonies on the largest scale” (Roszak, 1972, p. 400). According to Morito (2002):

> To some extent, conceptual clarity is sacrificed when taking holistic/non-mechanistic elements into account in explanations of ecosystems processes … a certain fuzziness in how wholes are causally effective is unavoidable. We cannot model such causal relations on the behaviour of billiard balls nor predict, in a mathematically rigorous way, just how holistic causality operates. (p. 76)

**Retiring Person-in-Environment**

Like a Trojan horse, social work’s ecological metaphor of *person-in-environment* contains serious limitations hidden within the very expression itself. The words and grammatical structure suggest a dominant/subordinate relationship between two separate and distinct entities. There have been occasional calls in the social work literature to re-think our *person-in-environment* concept. As a profession rooted in the English language and an academic preference for deconstruction and analysis, however, we have tended to respond to the challenge by trying to learn still more about either the “person” or the “environment.” Like moths to a flame, we are attracted to the nouns as our focus. We continue to split these entities into further labeled component parts and subcategories for analysis. In our profession’s established settings for debate and discussion, we revert to our easy words; we cling to our “person-in-environment.” Through this process of disfluency, we avoid talking about our relationship and responsibilities with the natural world in a meaningful way, even though environmental issues have emerged as a priority for the larger society.

The *person-in-environment* metaphor has accomplished many positive things in social work. It helped us to integrate various levels of practice (casework, groupwork, family work, organizational and community work) into one relatively unified profession. *Person-in-environment* emphasized the transactional nature of our work, beyond fixing individuals in isolation. We were encouraged to look at intergroup relations, at issues of oppression, racism, and empowerment. Yet there have also been disadvantages to the *person-in-environment* metaphor and it may be time to question its continued prominence. The profession’s tendency to limit the broad notion of environment to focus only on social environments seriously inhibits our ability to engage with pressing environmental concerns. It is time to move on, to retire *person-in-environment* as the foundation metaphor of social work for the 21st Century. If we merely pause to add environmental concerns only at the level of our conceptual frameworks, we will again be thinking about ecology rather than thinking ecologically (Morito, 2002).
Where do we go from here? Those who would push us in new directions speak of such processes as placemaking, wayfinding, earthkeeping, orientating, and placetelling. Some have combined familiar words in new ways to express place-based concepts such as ecological literacy, nature centredness, attentive living in place, or local life opportunities. These holistic and relationship-based concepts are often fuzzy, intuitive, imprecise, and multidisciplinary—qualities that tend to be shunned by Western academia and professions. Yet the notion of place appears to be emerging as central to a number of disciplines.

What happens if we replace “environment” with “place” in the metaphor? “Place” combines location and physical environment with character, meaning, and emotional significance for people; it is a multidisciplinary concept that brings together the natural world with human history, activities, and aspirations. “Place” is an interactive and holistic concept. Social components cannot easily be extracted from “place” for separate consideration (as was the case with “environment”).

The “person” of person-in-environment implied a focus on individuals. Social work has techniques for engaging groups and communities, but it could be argued that individual practice has assumed overall priority historically. This could be a problem because present environmental threats demand a communal response. Hawley (1986) warned us that a sustainable relationship with the natural world cannot be achieved through the actions of individuals working independently because “adaptation is a collective rather than an individual process” (p. 12). Thinking ecologically involves thinking about “people” rather than the individual “person.”

Now that we have the nouns, what word best expresses the connection, the relationship between “people” and “place” central to a relevant profession in the 21st Century? The current preposition “in” is flawed because it conveys a dominant/subordinate relationship relegating place to the background as a modifier. Some have suggested the preposition “of” because it introduces a sense of belonging (people of place); others have suggested “with” to convey a collaborative partnership (people with place). Both suggestions, however, perpetuate an assumption of two separate entities. Based on the holistic concepts presented from the Aboriginal social work literature, the best choice might be the simple yet powerful preposition “as.” An expression of people as place conveys unity and holism that brings us immediately to concerns of sustainability and stewardship.

Viewed within a paradigm or metaphor of people as place, humans cannot be understood separate from the natural world. A major objective for social work at this time, according to Coates (2003), is to “help bring about a transformation of society into one with a vision and mandate that recognizes that we are intimately and symbiotically connected with nature and all people” (p. 97). Human health and welfare is bound up with environmental health and welfare. Environments are not merely lifeless backdrops for human activity, any more than people are merely temporary actors in an ongoing natural system. We are entwined with the natural world in a continuing process of co-creation. Human development cannot be separated from stewardship of the earth. In short, we are our surroundings: people as place.
If *people as place* were accepted as the foundation metaphor, then what might resulting social work models look like? When the world is understood as a process of continuous co-creation involving people and the natural world, then what is our ideal, our vision? What are we trying to accomplish? The social purpose of such an ecological model could be stated simply as “living well in place.” As we have seen, some preliminary work has already been done on this notion of “living well in place” in other disciplines, primarily education (Orr, 1992). Many aspects have already been identified: living well ecologically, living well politically, living well economically, living well spiritually, and living well in community (Haas & Nachtigal, 1998). This idea of living well in place integrates social justice with environmental justice, human rights with environmental rights, and human responsibilities with environmental responsibilities. Obviously, dynamic sustainability is a key factor of living well in place; otherwise, we risk losing the very space to which our meanings, identity, and survival are attached. Living well in place is a process and not an end state.

The current generation of social work practitioners and builders of knowledge has operated for over thirty years with models of practice based on a metaphor of *person-in-environment*. Yet there have been great changes since we adopted that metaphor. We are now confronted with the formidable “inconvenient truth” (Gore, 2006) of climate change and other environmental threats to our very existence, threats that were not considered or even anticipated when we built our practice models. Those models may no longer be adequate for coping with the challenges faced by today’s societies and the planet itself. Coates (2003) put things very clearly: “Social work has the choice of continuing to support a self-defeating social order or recreating itself to work toward a just and sustainable society” (p. 159). A new foundation metaphor of *people as place* might help us focus on the crucial task of living well on this planet.
References


