

Episode 189 - Rachel Forbes, Dr. Andrea Nesmith, Meredith Powers, and Dr. Cathryne Schmitz: Environmental Justice

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work the podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice research. We educate we connect. We care. We are in social work. Hello from Buffalo. It's feeling more and more like spring around here all the time and living in a four season climate puts us in touch with the predictability of change and the promise of new beginnings. At some point I hope we get a chance to visit Buffalo specifically downtown where things are changing at an alarming rate. Downtown condominiums apartments and wonderful older homes are being gobbled up by young professionals as well as by graduates of our numerous colleges and our university. There's a lot of energy in the air. I'm Peter Sobota one of the social work professions defining features is our emphasis on the person and environment. In this episode our guests discussed environmental justice what it is and who gets access to it. They see environmental social work and environmental justice as a subset of our more traditional conceptualization of social justice. Whether it's the water in Flint Michigan or global warming the disproportionate impact on vulnerable and marginalized communities requires that social workers practice beyond the micro level specifically entering the arenas of influencing policymaking advocacy social action and various other social or rural sites.

[00:01:53] Our guests describe what they believe are the implications for social work education and how social workers can market their skillset in accordance with an environmental perspective in nontraditional practice settings. They conclude with practical suggestions on how to integrate environmental justice content into the social work curriculum and an interdisciplinary practice as well. Rachel Forbes is an assistant professor of the practice of social work at University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work and the western Colorado MSW program director. She is a member of the CSWE committee on environmental justice and the C.S. W.E. council for global learning and practice. Andy Nesmith Ph.D. is assistant professor at the St. Thomas School of Social Work. Her research examines the intersection of environmental justice and current social work practice and where practitioners see educational needs. In addition she mentors students in preparing grant proposals and in implementing independent research projects on environmental justice Meredith Power's sustainability Faculty Fellow and the project coordinator for the college of social works Green Initiative at the University of South Carolina. As a doctoral candidate her current research includes the professional socialization of Social Workers ecological justice and university community partnerships for sustainability Cathryne L. Schmitz Ph.D. is professor at the Department of Social Work and professor at the Department of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. She's an affiliate faculty in Women and Gender Studies and a research fellow with the Center for New North Carolinians. Her scholarship focuses on analysis of the privilege oppression nexus critical multiculturalism environmental sustainability leadership interdisciplinary education and global engagement and peacemaking. Our guests were interviewed by our own Dr. Louanne Bakk assistant professor here at the School of Social Work. They spoke in February of 2016. Hi this is Louanne Bakk

[00:04:10] And I'll be the interviewer for this podcast session. I'd love to start off by asking the group to tell me a little bit about what you consider to be environmental justice. Hi this is Cathryne and I speak for environmental justice as this group has worked together on multiple projects. Really I think we started from two interrelated Poca and one is environmental justice occurs when all people equally experience high level of environmental protection and no group or community is excluded from environmental policy decision making nor affected disproportionately by

environmental hazards. The second is that environmental justice affirms ecological unity and the interdependence of all species respect for cultural and biological diversity and the right to be free from ecological destruction and this includes the responsible use of ecological resources including land water air and food. Obviously the complicated and complex. And how you implement that operationalize that is what is difficult but hopefully through this conversation that some of how we work towards implementing that and working towards our goals will emerge across the time we're talking together. Meredith I just wanted to chime in on that one as well. It is a very complex issue and I try to break it down for my students sometimes by explaining it this way.

[00:05:44] Certainly it's much more detailed the way Cathryne just presented it and we appreciate that definition but I sort of see it as an overarching umbrella for ecological justice and that means justice for all of ecology all living part of our planet and then underneath that umbrella is social justice and that has to do with the justices towards humans as a species and then underneath social justice environmental justice which is a very specific type of justice related to environmental conditions that affect human populations and are addressing human social injustices. So again environmental justice is just sort of a subset of social justice and that sort of is a way that I explain it to my students to break it down a little bit more simply but again it's a very complex idea. Excellent. Some great definitions or great descriptions. So I'd like to ask is what is environmental social work. I say this is made up again I'd love to jump on that. I'm actually glad you phrased it that way. Environmental social work because I want to bring up two key points. First while there may be social workers who do work more directly with environmental issues we don't want to give anyone the image that environmental social work is actually a niche or a subset of social work when in reality what we want people to understand is that all social work should be environmental social work meaning that all social workers in any area of practice should consider the inextricable links between the social and environmental justice issues. So if we as a profession are based on the framework of person and environment we must consider that physical environment as well as a social political and economic environment of our clients and their communities. This is often referred to as broadening or expanding the person environment framework to include the physical environment. Now that being said there are many ways that social workers address environmental issues in their practice.

[00:07:47] For instance social workers are doing activities such as starting school recycling programs as a school social worker running community campaigns to respond to health hazards such as air pollution and leading Llama checks into the wilderness therapy for at risk youth as well as for educational components of environmental education. And often the social workers use nature as a tool to benefit their clients as they also work to teach their clients how to care for the environment and I have dozens of other examples and I'm sure others could chime in as well on what social workers do related to the environment says Rachel. I think specifically one way that we can do a better job in social work practice in terms of elevating environmental injustices as they apply to our social work practice is through field education. I think that community partnerships through the lens of especially built education there's a lot of room there for students to explore not only concepts but to actually practice developing skills surrounding the values of protecting the environment for all people and also promoting the definitions that we've already heard. So in my own experience here in western Colorado at the University of Denver specifically we've really tried to elevate social sustainability environmental justice work in social work practice through the lens of education in terms of opening up agencies where perhaps there is an opportunity to do for example advocacy work for clean water policies. There are a number of organizations where I think if we take a sort of nontraditional approach to perhaps fill that occasion you know especially in their broad macro practice and policy advocacy program planning and development in the field I do think that that is one arena where environmental social work happens to be at this point taking off quite rapidly. We are both providing some fantastic examples as opportunities for social work. Thank you.

[00:09:51] So what do you see as being some of the ways that the physical environment interacts people and create social justice problems. This is Andy. If the physical environment is so huge it's surrounds us in every way and so at the most basic level we're talking about the water people drink to have clean water we've got some national issues going on right now around that with social justice the air that we breathe especially for children the physical spaces that people have to be in. When you think back to Jane Adams one of the things that she talked about and worked toward for people the settlement houses was for place spaces for children to be able to be outside to be able to be free of toxins that are in the environment that affect people's physical functioning and make it so that they come out work on other things like mental health and relationships other things like that because they're dealing with the fact that their water has poisoned for example. And I just you know as I'm thinking about that question it's not so much the physical environment create social justice problems it's the way that we handle what's happening with the environment. It's the dis the policy decisions get made out of that. It's where dump or industrial areas are placed. What communities are next to which tend to be people who are poor people of color people who have less power. Yeah I think that there's a lot of different areas and examples where social workers are Coy's to intervene at all levels from the micro all the way up to the macro and you know especially when we talk about diversity in culture.

[00:11:31] I also want to piggyback off of that comment in that regard. You know we do see disproportionate impact happening in vulnerable communities especially when it comes to environmental justice. It's for indigenous peoples in that regard of deforestation the impacts of climate change cetera. So I think there are numerous implications in terms of a social work called action through helping you know folks help themselves who are most vulnerable to the catastrophic changes of phenomenon like climate change. This is Mertes. I also want to echo what Andy was saying a moment ago about the pioneers in social work who actually did work on environmental issues such as the labour laws and the industrial revolution created so many toxins and hazardous living conditions and neighbourhoods. They actually helped to start waste management programs in the neighborhoods as well as develop Parks and Recreation so that people had green spaces to go and be outside in a safe healthy environment to reconnect with nature. You touched on this briefly in your other responses. What does workers Kidder's specifically understand about environmental concerns. It's a big question but there's a lot that needs to be done in terms of education. The first thing that needs to happen is that we as educators need to be clear about some of the most pressing concerns that are around global warming that are around devastation of forest land any kind of natural resources but also really in particular those disproportionate impacts and because the disproportionate impacts on communities who have less voice people of color that you know some of the ones that are already mentioned because of that we also need to understand policy around the environment.

[00:13:22] It doesn't mean that we need to be absolute experts in policy but we need to understand how those policies get made. What are the key kinds of policies that are making big decisions that affect disproportionately certain groups and how we can have a foot in the door in terms of advocating and making a difference in those policies so that we can pass that on to our students and educate them to continue to carry the torch. This is Catherine and I was just going to say building off of that where you mentioned marginalized populations are vulnerable populations. I think it's also important to remember that we also have links in the global issues where at the macro level probably the micro to where wealthy nations are creating circumstances that really cause environmental hazards in developing nations and also the impact of corporations and how they impact vulnerable countries. This is merda. So yeah I'd like to chime in to answer that a little bit. What short educators could offer. Honestly I think that in social work education we could offer an alternative paradigm or a paradigm shift and there's a growing number of social work scholars who are calling for this type of paradigm shift to embrace a more I guess eco centric paradigm and that

would help us to reshape and expand our professional identity to include a response to the environmental crisis and ultimately transform our profession at large. Against an eco centric paradigm as opposed to a human centric paradigm means that we consider humans as just one part of the environment as a whole not operating outside of the environment rather seeking human and environmental well-being as interwoven and inextricably linked in social work.

[00:15:09] This egocentric paradigm influences the way that we operationalize that expanded person environment framework which could be made explicit during social work education and again the expanded framework means that human needs are not elevated over any other part of the environment needs but rather seen as equal to those other needs in the environment and wholly dependent upon each other for their mutual well-being. So again that extended person environment framework also takes into consideration not only the social economic and political issues but also the physical environment and the built in the natural considers not only the impact of the physical environment may have on humans but also that reciprocal impact that humans have on the environment. I had a comment that I could add to that just in terms of I think that one thing that educators and social workers should understand about environmental concerns is that the ways that students will hopefully market themselves once they get out of school and job and workforce world is through transferable job skills that we all know are so important. You are so short skill sets and practices that you know we can practice our social work values and a number of different ways including anything from research analytical skills development to community outreach and marketing to negotiation to product development or policy advocacy and I think that one of the ideas that social work educators can and should be keenly aware of is that in a world where interdisciplinary and trans disciplinary practices are evolving at a rapid pace I think our social work students when they are entering into the job market they will have the expectation put upon them by perhaps employers to understand how the social work fashion again is interdisciplinary.

[00:17:04] Maybe perhaps working with conservation or public health or environmental health etc. to really elevate and ensure likeness between what we do and perhaps other fields. This is handy. I just want to say something else in regard to what ritual is just saying I think you know you raise an important part about how the graduating students are marketing themselves. I did a recent study of social workers already out in the field who are potentially going to be hiring new graduates and asked them how important it is that the people that they hire are informed and knowledgeable about environmental issues environmental justice etc.. Overwhelmingly that's what they want to see. They want to see that as part of the skill set that new social workers have. So I really want to underscore that I think that's an important point to reach through some great employees. Thank you. So in what ways is the social work profession situated to contribute to the necessary changes. This is Mertes just continuing that conversation what we just talked about what social work educators are kind of trying to convey to their students is that they have skills that certainly are interdisciplinary and that they could be marketed to those interdisciplinary fields to work on these problems such as environmental concerns. One thing that a generalist social practitioner has is that we are very good at being a broker and a translator.

[00:18:27] So a lot of the scientific language that might be used on environmental concerns can be easily translated to layman's terms to work with community populations and vice versa and it could also offer an opportunity to sort of broker or bridge between those two players to help them come to I guess inclusive type solutions where the community is not just put upon to say hey we're here to fix your problem where the scientific experts but rather to include them in the development of listing what they feel are the actual concerns and what they think are the solutions because they are actually the experts in their own communities. So again all of these are skills that social workers bring to the field simply from their generalist social work knowledge let alone their interest in working with environmental issues. So what is the role of social worker education. You was changed but specifically with what you are worth to share a little bit. Yeah this is Andy. I think that

Pardos. I mean there's the obvious pieces of we need to touch students up who are who are not as aware what some of the key issues are with global warming. The overuse of resources the toxins the environment etc. But we also really need to help students see the link between what's going on in the natural environment with human functioning with the functioning of what we depend on and need for survival and also with how this is related to social justice which we talk about so much in social work. This really is a social justice issue helps them make those connections so that they see that this is something that they can use a lot of the skills that they're already learning in other social work courses or other social work material to apply to this context.

[00:20:16] Yeah this is madness and I would absolutely echo what Andy just said taking it maybe one step further not just showing them that there is this link between environmental concerns and social justices that we care so much about as a profession but that we actually have a responsibility to address them. Yes. Thank you for adding that. I think that is absolutely really critical. Excellent point. So what I don't you know to discredit the ways environmental concerns can be integrated across the curriculum. Catherine I sure have a lot of ideas but I just want to start by saying that I really think one of the way to just make this a part of people's mindset is just to add case studies reading outcomes to papers that have to do with ecological and environmental justice or environmental degradation issues across all of our horse that we just make it part of normal. Those were practiced by interspersing case studies and requirements and thought in each of our courses or each of our curriculum areas. This has made us certainly think that we can should and to use this across all of our curriculum in fact we have the new eephus guidelines from yesterday mandating that we should be including environmental justice in our curriculum. And what we've done at the college where I am in social work programs we've actually worked with faculty to examine what syllabus they already have and offer them suggestions on what readings or exercises or videos and other resources that they could use to infuse it into the course that they already have developed so that they don't have to become overwhelmed with what to do or how to add a whole module to their course that's already so full. But just how to infuse it into little pieces here and there.

[00:22:14] And again as Catherine mentioned to make it the norm that this is something that social workers talk about this is something we do and we are responsible for. And just part of our normal natural conversations and discussions in any social work curriculum class in grade school you know issues of both ecological and environmental justice be integrated into and across the curriculum. Well Rachel I think that one of the most effective ways to reach students when you are introducing a topic or practice area in social work that might be seemingly unrelated foreign you know complex. I think one of the most effective ways to introduce that kind of content is to bring in social workers from the field who are practicing their social work skills and to have been told their tales about the ways in which they were able to not only secure work but find meaning and fulfillment in their lives in terms of practicing environmental justice focus social work. So what I like to do is to find social workers who I'm following with nationally and internationally and have them come in and talk about their story and talk about how you know perhaps they maybe didn't study environmental justice content in their DFW and or MSW programs but now that they're out in the working world you know they've decided that this is something that is not only happening at an increased rate in terms of the job demand for social workers they have this kind of specialized knowledge but also that you can find a really meaningful career in doing environmental justice focused social work social work and kind of elevating the way that's possible through their own experiences.

[00:24:06] And of course I think students really connect to guest speakers and lectures in a way when there's novel content compared to you know reading about it perhaps in a journal article which is of course value and I just feel like putting that human face to these kinds of quote unquote fringe career. There are different areas of practice sexting might not have been exposed to in the past. I think speakers tend to be a one way that excites people to get on board. So Cathryne I just

jump in briefly. But I think it's easy to actually once you think about it integrate a process curriculum whether it is in human behavior practice research policy or field that we feel that we talked about that earlier here that we begin to find placements where students are doing this in the field we integrate it into the for instance I worked with students who were in a local school and yes the whole school invite involved in environmental or ecological issues but with practice I think it's easy to think about very certainly as we think about social justice environmental justice economic justice that we can think about ways to connect theory across and policy again is an easy one. I know you were talking about integrating into research recently. Yes I was. In fact that's what I'm doing this semester I'm having my students design and evaluation of a community where they have to figure out their sample and their measurement and etc. but it's around an environmental crisis. I'm using the Flint water crisis I'm using the hurricane Sandy. They will look up some current information online and then they will use the methodology in that context. Understandable.

[00:25:52] The impact on the people and how they would address it in a social work research modality which is an easy way to bring in the local wisdom the national and the global you know which also can be done with policy in terms of looking at policy issues that have implications for the environment. The actual untidy definitely this is narrative. I wanted to chime in and just real quickly on that. Again I spoke about how we could approach faculty and try to infuse it from the syllabus standpoint but also when I'm teaching a class I asked the students what their topic of interest is and whatever it may be I help them see those connections to how the physical environment dealt or natural affects their clients or communities of interest and really help that hit home for them in a personal way and certainly encourage them to apply that in their field settings as they develop their practice skills as well. This is Rachel I just wanted to put a comment out there in terms of the implicit curriculum. I think that oftentimes in that curriculum that we offer in our schools of those working in our programs of Social Work there's there's some down there. Again we're incorporating some of this environmental justice work for example in our very small rural programs here in western Colorado. We prioritize and pride ourselves on the fact that we have a very sustainable and green operational kind of flow in terms of purchase ordering and recycling in the classroom.

[00:27:23] And so we implicitly you know even though we don't have it as an assessment from one of our courses we're constantly talking about in modeling ways that we as social workers can even in small micro behaviors that we can do day to day in terms of fostering that behavior change for people you know just incorporating in very small little things that students can take note of while they're here at school that also promote environmental justice ideas. This is Mertes that's an excellent point Rachel. We certainly at the College of Social Work at the University of South Carolina we began the green initiative where we were trying to green our policies and practices and as well as our pedagogy. So we had developed a green initiative and we even made a little youtube video to try to educate students and to say this is why we have recycling in the college of social work so that they understood that link. And also we are modeling that behavior as an organization ourselves. Great idea. Just ask to do now is talk about the ways that these issues have a local Islamist global impact in how we encourage students to engage locally. This is handy. This is something that I've spent some time thinking about and studying and working on because I found originally when I would talk to students they saw especially the justice issue as being environmental justice issues being something that happened in other countries in particular because that's where we were hearing about it more on the news. The really poor community that lives on the ocean side and they've had mudslides summers in a way to get help to them. Things like that. And one of the things that I've been doing is getting them to pay attention to what's happening in their own community. You know where it look at the map look at Google Earth. Where are the industrial sites in your neighborhood.

[00:29:20] And what kind of neighbors are next to those where the highways because the pollution

that come out of the exhaust systems can affect children's developing brains. Where are those neighborhoods. What happens when there is clean water or not. It's really saying that this stuff is happening right in our neighborhood. And right now I'm in my human behavior in the social environment corps. I have a group of students who are working with them in Minnesota who are working with the Mississippi watershed management organization and they are working with the Hmong community here because a lot of fishing to help them be more connected to the river and recognize the value of having the river be clean and help them to also be stewards because they both depend on it and enjoy it. And we're all contributors to the health of the river. This is Rachel. I think that one of the ways that we talk about engaging our students here especially in rural communities to the larger global context is through the idea of solidarity and we try to again model that for our students as much as possible. One of the coalitions that our program is part of is the now in partnership and it's an international group of folks. It's to the FAO at the United Nations and it's a range with a range of different kinds of organizations that are part of this coalition. But our shared vision and our shared mission is to bring together people all across the world who share the same commitment to investing in esteemable communities all across now and towns in the world.

[00:30:59] So that's one arena where we've been able to engage with other small mountain towns internationally and say our issues are your issues and we stand in solidarity with you as mayor and I'd like to add something. Certainly we try to encourage our students to become aware of things and follow legitimate news sources so that they can find out about international and domestic interactions and how they are domestic policy for instance impact those international crises. But we certainly encourage them to get involved and engaged locally in service learning projects or if they're part of a field placement already help them see how they can maybe green their field agency or help adjust their clients and communities and think about the physical environment and not just the social environment that the clients are involved with. So again just helping them connect to their actual social art practice and then also to connect to local sustainability organizations for instance on campus. We have the office of sustainability and sustainable Carolina which are campus wide organizations that are college of social work is trying to connect students to to get them involved locally in the campus wide effort in our community efforts for sustainability. OK. The final thing I'd like to ask you to do is talk about the role in interdisciplinary course on environmental justice concerns. This is Cathryne and I've been teaching an interdisciplinary course on environmental justice for about five years now. And it's also a course that brings in both grad undergrad students and while I think it's really vital that we cut it across the curriculum.

[00:32:40] I've also seen that discourse has played a role in expanding their ability to work on complex issues as they begin to study in an environment where theory knowledge development crosses those boundaries and teaches them each other's languages and where they work on teams that are interdisciplinary. It helps for pair social work students to engage in complex practice contexts that require crossing disciplinary boundaries in order to be responsive to community needs. And I think so often they get out of school without really engaging in experience and how do you cross boundaries. Listen beyond our professional language and then enter practice on the ground where you need to create with people who had a very different educational experience than you have. And I find by the end of the semester they are able to think beyond just social work terminology and theory. And so I think that's a valuable contribution because environmental issues on many levels are very complex and they will not be working just with social workers. Rachel I don't have personal experience like Cathryne in terms of teaching an interdisciplinary course. However I just wanted to know that the CSWE annual program meaning being this year is advancing collaborative practice Plutos work education and I would argue that this is a very timely theme for the 8 p.m. in that regard. Now as Meredith mentioned we have the 2015 iPass with the inclusion of environmental justice explicitly for the first time which is wonderful and I think it's kind of the go hand in hand as compliment and collaborative practice and environmental justice social work. We are interfacing with environmental health offices and public health workers and

we're working with people that are doing that mapping and all sorts of different seemingly very siloed careers.

[00:34:46] But at the end of the day I do believe we share very similar values depending on who you're partnering with and that collaborative type of practice is really going to be seeing more and more of it. I think in social work as we move forward. Yes absolutely. Rachel and I would say I get biology students I get students who are studying technology who are doing communications students in our environmental sciences program and political science program. So it really varies widely. This is merda. I've taught it as an independent study for students who have been in multiple disciplines and I actually have gotten them to collaborate and read each other's papers and that's been an interesting thing. But also I wanted to mention that the social workers that I've interviewed for another research project who are out in the field working on environmental issues they have actually situated themselves in jobs that are very interdisciplinary and they may be the only social worker that they know at the table when they come to some of those discussions. So really we are in a global world and an interdisciplinary world and certainly on these environmental issues we need to work interdisciplinary. But we also need to know about our social allies and to build solidarity within the profession as well as beyond it.

[00:36:09] So again teaching social work students to consider the physical and the built and natural environment but also I've been working with students who are in other disciplines that are for instance environmental science to help them consider the social impacts of social justice and the need for inclusive programming and finding solutions that are inclusive of the people in the communities that they are trying to help address those environmental concerns helping them to make sure that all of the players are at the table and not just those who have power and they're really trying to help them understand sort of more of the social aspects but social work students may already have those skills. But helping those other disciplines to consider those skills as well. Very good points. Any other comments before we close I think the only other thing that I don't think we made I don't know where it would fit really is that this is not just a macro issue but definitely can span all different levels of social work practice and research and that we want social workers to understand that even in that micro level with their clients they can really help them understand how their physical environment is impacting their mental health or their physical health or their family dynamics. You know whether or not it's transportation or the lack of exercise or safe space to exercise or the lack of green spaces or sidewalks so that they can safely walk outdoors. All those different aspects affect people in that micro level. And certainly it requires the full gamut of social work roles. But it's not just a macro level social work issue. Another thing that I wanted to add I don't know if it's appropriate to list here or not but it's a resource. I just wanted to invite anyone who want to participate. We're just trying to build solidarity. Right now it's amongst social workers internationally but it could certainly be interdisciplinary but it's a listserv online that anyone is welcome to join. And it is for a green or ecologically conscious social workers and it's the online collaborative network. Very nice.

[00:38:17] Well it was a pleasure to talk with all of you you've really presented and I think some fantastic content of information and ideas for integrating environmental justice and social work. The work is done and this is truly impressive. So thank you so much for sharing your time and sharing with you've been listening to our guests discuss environmental justice on in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. We look forward to your continued support of the series. For more information about who we are as a school our history our online and on the ground degree and continuing education programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. And while you're there check out our technology and social work Research Center. You'll find it under the Community Resources menu.