

Long abstract – Open section

Eco-social work perspectives in Community social work

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Current environmental conditions and the impacts of pollution and the climate crisis invite social work to focus on the role of the physical-natural environment in determining the well-being of individuals, groups and communities. In recent years, there has been a proliferation of social work approaches which have explored the links between social needs, ecological crisis and environmental injustice. Eco-social work approaches focus on the contribution of social work in reducing environmental inequalities and promoting social interventions that take into account the ecological dimension. These approaches emphasise the overcoming of the 'person-in-environment' concept, which has been central to social work studies for many years, and the necessary shift from anthropocentric to ecocentric views, focusing on the concept of 'person with the environment', in order to reaffirm the inseparable link between the person and the physical-natural environment in which they live. Specifically, the eco-social work approach invites practitioners to consider environmental issues as a priority and to take action in their professional and private lives to limit the ongoing climate crisis and its impacts, knowing that promoting social justice also means addressing environmental justice.

Eco-social work, like the other ecological approaches to social work, is not intended to be a new method of social work, but rather a perspective that can be promoted at all levels (casework, group work and community work) and in different fields. The typical skills and functions of social workers can be creatively applied and enhanced in dealing with issues related to environmental protection and environmental injustice.

At present, in the Italian context, social work curricula scarcely address environmental issues in relation to social work and very little research has been carried out on this topic. At the level of social work practice, several projects have been developed to address environmental injustices, climate disasters and to promote environmental, social and economic sustainability, especially in community social work and in the social and professional reintegration of disadvantaged people.

This paper presents a theoretical framework of the eco-social work approach, focusing on the contribution of social work in reducing environmental inequalities and promoting community-based interventions that take into account the ecological dimension. The author presents an experimental community social work project carried out in a neighbourhood in the suburbs of Milan, in northern Italy. The project, which aimed to promote community development in a multi-ethnic neighbourhood characterised by social disintegration and conflict, poverty and housing problems, involved two community social workers who accompanied and supported the community in reflecting on and responding to ecological concerns and environmental degradation that emerged from the community profile.

According to the literature, the community social workers promoted a participatory planning process, working closely with community members who were interested and motivated to take care of their own community. Developing community ties, caring for the shared environment and

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promoting a culture of environmental, economic and social sustainability emerged as priority goals identified by the community members involved.

From the project description it is clear that the community workers were able to identify and highlight the environmental issues that affected the perception of wellbeing / malaise of the community members with whom they were working, as well as providing - and not only - an ecological interpretation of the needs and concerns perceived by professionals, members of non-profit organisations and residents of the neighbourhood. In planning, they worked to stimulate stakeholder participation in actions to promote the desired change and supported the network's actions in planning and implementing ecological and social interventions.

In line with the relevant literature, the skills and functions commonly held by social workers can be used effectively to promote and implement eco-social work practices. In particular, skills such as facilitation, coordination, needs and risk assessment, planning, negotiation, mediation, community activation and advocacy are needed to work with communities in assessing and addressing environmental issues and their impact on community living conditions.

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