Transforming Social Work's Understanding of Person and Environment: Spirituality and the "Common Ground"

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Abstract

Social work has long declared a dual focus on *person and environment*. In practice, however, this reciprocal relationship has been heavily weighted towards an emphasis on the person as subject and the environment in the background as modifier or context. The *environment* itself has been reduced to the *social environment* in much mainstream social work theory and practice. The broad notion of spirituality now developing in the social work literature has the potential to transform our limited notion of *person and environment*. If we can come to understand ourselves as elements of a living environment (creation in the spiritual sense), then we transform our notion of *person and environment* to a perspective of *person as environment.* We begin to see ourselves as dynamic components of a living system. Such transformation calls social work to look beyond interpersonal relationships to the very nature of our connection with the planet we inhabit – literally our "common ground".

This paper examines the developing literature on spirituality and social work, and finds evidence to support such a transformation as social work starts to move beyond its limited historical notion of *person and environment* to truly accept our "common ground", the planet where we all live.

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> In the grass by the pond beneath the dogwoods, the toads and the frogs and the newts and their hypnotic sunlight had been irreversibly incorporated into my world, literally into me. My world was being tampered with; I was being invaded. Next spring I would have a piece missing, chewed out of me by the ditch diggers. (Livingston, 1981, p. 101)

Livingston's eloquent recollection of the impending destruction of a ravine near his childhood home captures the simplicity of a child's integration of person and place. The creatures and features of that natural environment were a part of him; a piece of him would die when the ravine was destroyed for development purposes. The literal common ground he enjoyed, respected, and joined was about to be altered forever.

The declared theme for this first North American Conference on Spirituality and Social Work is "The Transforming Power of Spirituality: Breaking Barriers and Creating Common Ground" (Canadian Society for Spirituality and Social Work, 2006). The ordering of these concepts suggests that spirituality and transformation are primary forces which may lead to secondary objectives of overcoming obstacles and finding consensus among diverse viewpoints. I want to argue for reversing the order of these concepts and their relative importance by suggesting that the simple yet powerful concept of "common ground" offers a perspective that could serve to broaden or transform social work's understanding of spirituality. Common ground may not have to be "created" as the conference theme suggests, but rather re-discovered as our home, as the physical reality

that connects all of Creation. I am sure that “common ground” was more than an abstract concept for the young Livingston in the opening quotation.

I begin the discussion with a brief exploration of the concept of “common ground” itself, during which I identify a process of narrowing the definition over time to exclude the physical environment. I then show that we have constrained our understandings of the natural environment and spirituality within the social work literature using a similar process. Finally, I return to the notion of common ground as a possibility for reversing this trend.

Common Ground

The first usage I could find of the term “common ground” arose from trading practices over a thousand years ago in Europe, north Africa, and southeast Asia (Wikipedia, 2006). Merchants or traders would travel from place to place along well worn and easily recognized routes. As these traders passed by a particular settlement along the path, they were perceived as foreigners or outsiders by the locals. Although such labeling of the traders as “the other” was often accompanied by feelings of suspicion, mistrust, and fear, local populations probably had high regard for their wares. A practice developed whereby local merchants would select an open clearing alongside the trade path. Here they would lay out their own goods for trade then hide under cover nearby with their weapons. If the passing traders were interested in the local goods displayed in the clearing, they would stop and lay their goods for trade beside the local commodities on the “common ground.” If there was no attack from the surrounding cover, the traders would assume the proposed exchange was acceptable to the locals. They would take the local goods from the clearing and be on their way. The locals could

then emerge from cover and take the new merchandise back to their settlement. In this way, the two trading groups never encountered each other in face-to-face social relationships. "Common ground" was an actual physical space of safety for the exchange of goods among groups who did not trust each other.

Later use of the term appears in the Middle Ages in Europe when "common ground" or "the commons" was an open area usually in the centre of a village where such communal resources as the market square, meeting places, or the town water pump might be located. Such common ground was accessible to everyone. Different groups would respect or at least tolerate each other on the common ground to ensure that everyone had access to the needed resources. Once again, the concept of "common ground" involved the designation of a specific place where it was safe for different groups to access what they needed.

Somehow, over time, the spatial aspect of "common ground" has been lost. A current definition of "common ground" refers to "shared opinions between two people or groups of people who disagree about most other things" (Cambridge International Dictionary of Idioms, 2006). Common ground has become a conceptual place, a region of consensus for ideas or opinions. We speak of people or groups finding common ground in the sense of mutual understandings or values. The term is now quite divorced from any connection to geographic location for activity and interaction.

I have observed that this process (of beginning with a broad definition that includes a component of physical space then moving over time to strip the concept of its geographic reality and limit its application) is quite apparent in the mainstream social work literature as well as in the developing discussion of spirituality and social work. I

want to look briefly at how the process has played out in both these areas before returning to the notion of "common ground" in its fullest geographic and spiritual sense.

Social Work

Since the early 1980's, social work has declared a dual focus on *person and environment.* In reality, professional practice and education have placed much more emphasis on the personal side of this duality, at the expense of environmental issues. Our knowledge base provides many more categories for understanding people than environments. The individual person or group has been the primary subject while the environment has been presented as modifier or context. What begins in the social work literature as a broad concept of *environment* is quickly and arbitrarily reduced to the much narrower *social environment* with no explanation or rationale offered to justify the limitation. Elsewhere (Zapf, 2005), I have documented many instances of this narrowing process. A few examples here will serve to illustrate the point.

Consider this selection from Yelaja's (1985) discussion of the dominant concepts influencing social work:

> The use of the ecology metaphor accentuates the reciprocal relationships between the individual and the environment and the continuous adaptation of both person and environment to each other . . . Within the ecological perspective, human growth and development constantly change in relation to the social environment – and the social environment changes in response to the human factors. (p. 29)

Within a single paragraph, the broad notion of *environment* somehow is limited to the *social environment* without explanation. This is a common pattern in the social work literature.

McKay (2002) declares that "social work's identifying characteristic is its dual focus on person and environment" but immediately asserts the importance for

practitioners “of attempting to change the social environment” (p. 21). Following this same pattern, Heinonen and Spearman (2006) present the goal of social work as “a fit between the person and his or her environment so that both mutually experience benefits and growth (p. 202) but in the very next sentence they impose the curious limitation that “fit (or lack of it) occurs through social exchanges.”

Zastrow (2007) presents the ecological model as the current foundation for social work, a model that integrates personal treatment with system reform by concentrating on “transactions between people and their physical and social environments” (p. 24). Here is a deliberate effort to include the physical environment as an appropriate focus for social work, yet the accompanying diagram to illustrate this “person-in-environment conceptualization” (p. 25) identifies only social systems as constituting the relevant environment for practice (family system, social service system, political system, employment system, religious system, goods and services system, educational system). Without explanation, the physical environment has once again been dropped from view.

Social work continues to limit its concept of the environment to its social aspects – a curious process that mirrors the narrowing of the concept of “common ground.” As will be seen in the next section, I think we are at risk of applying the same arbitrary process of constraint to our definition of spirituality within social work.

Spirituality

Much of the recent discussion of spirituality and social work makes reference to Canda’s (1988) 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). While this foundational definition clearly includes relationships

between people and the physical or natural environment, we see in the literature that this component quickly disappears from most discussion of spirituality and social work. The broad concept of spirituality as meaningful connection with Creation narrows to become a quality of the individual. Again, I have provided many instances of this process in other writing (Zapf, 2005a) but a few examples here will illustrate the case.

Spirituality was described by Carroll (1997) as “the divine essence of the individual” (p. 29) and by Faiver, Ingersoll, O’Brien, and McNally (2001) as “an innate human quality” (p. 2). Sermabeikian (1994) presented a “theoretical framework for understanding spirituality within the individual” (p. 178). Ortiz and Smith (1999) conducted a content analysis of the term ‘spirituality’ in the social work literature and found themes of “interconnectedness between self, others, and sense of ultimacy as well as the individual’s need for generativity and inner meaning” (p. 309); none of the identified themes involved connections with the natural environment.

A recent text by Zastrow (2007) is the first mainstream generalist practice book I have found that includes a chapter on “Spirituality and Religion in Social Work Practice” (Chapter 13). This recognition of spirituality as central to our training and practice is promising, but the narrower person-centred definition of spirituality appears to be assumed. The whole discussion is presented under the umbrella of “culturally sensitive practice” (p. 365) with an emphasis on respect and appreciation for beliefs different from one’s own. Key components of spirituality are identified to include “the personal search for meaning in life, having a sense of identity, and having a value system” (p. 366). Questions are put forward for conducting assessments that include “spiritual aspects of clients” (p. 370), as well as guidelines for choosing appropriate spiritual interventions

with individual clients. Once again, spirituality is conceptualized as a characteristic of the individual with no mention of connections with the physical environment or non human world.

Hodge and Kaopua (2005) also argue for the importance of spiritual assessment and briefly review six qualitative instruments for conducting such assessments. These instruments appear to focus on the individual client's spiritual beliefs and practices. I find no mention of the physical environment or non-human world, although the Spiritual Eco-Map does focus on "that portion of clients' spiritual stories that exists in present space" to "emphasize clients' existing relationships to spiritual assets in their here-and-now environments" (p. 4). Elements of the physical environment might be included here, but as background for the client's spiritual stories and issues.

Return to Common Ground

Not everyone is ignoring the connections with the natural world in their explorations of spirituality and social work. 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. I would argue, however, that this call has not been heeded as the profession appears content overall with its limited understanding of spirituality as a human quality or social characteristic excluding any relationship with the non human world.

Perhaps we are missing the obvious if we accept Canda's invitation to re-visit *person-in-environment* but we focus our attention only on developing more comprehensive conceptualizations of "person" and "environment." Of course these

complex nouns are attractive subjects for renewed academic debate, but I wonder about the simple preposition "in." (I am frequently reminded by my Blackfoot colleagues that English is a great and powerful language for naming things but not very effective for conveying connections and relationships!) As long as I begin with the *person* <u>*in*</u> *environment* concept as a given, I am forced to separate the person from the natural world and think of them as two distinct entities. Yes they interact, but this interaction is not between equals. "Person" is the subject and "in environment" is the modifier. The environment is the backdrop for the more important human activity.

What happens to our understanding of the person/environment interaction if we challenge "in" as the relational preposition? The perspective of deep ecology rejects any division between people and the non human world, and demands that we come to value the natural environment for itself rather than simply for the resources we can extract and exploit (Ungar, 2003). Besthorn (2001) suggested that self-identity derives from an ecological consciousness, a

> moving away from a view of person-in-environment to one of self as part of a 'relational total-field' ... rather than experiencing ourselves as separate from our environment and existing *in* it, we begin to cultivate the insight that we are *with* our environment. (p. 31)

Is this the solution – the substitution of "with" for "in"? If we think of *person* <u>*with*</u> *environment*, we come to a much more egalitarian interaction than we had with *person* <u>*in*</u> *environment*. Interacting with another entity implies a recognition of the identity and autonomy of the other, and opens the door to collaboration and partnership. With the conceptualization of *person* <u>*with*</u> *environment*, the environment is no longer a secondary backdrop. It becomes a partner. We move forward together, in each other's company – *people with environment* and *environment with people* (the relationship can be read from

either direction). Although more equal, however, we are still two distinct and separate entities.

It may be true that "with" gives us a more balanced perspective on person/environment interaction than "in," but we are still assuming two distinct and separate entities. Are there other prepositions that hold more promise for expressing the profound relationship between people and the environment, the spiritual connection between the human and non human world? From the teachings that have been shared through the literature on Aboriginal spirituality and healing, we are challenged to consider another more holistic approach to the relationship. The foundation metaphor for this relationship has been characterized in traditional knowledge systems as "I am I and the Environment" (Ortega y Gasset, 1985) or "I'm not in the place but the place is in me" (Suopajarvi, 1998). This notion of "world-image identity" (Stairs & Wenzel, 1992) is profoundly different from the conventional Western assumption of self-image and individual identity. I see this as a perspective of *person <u>as</u> environment.* There is no hierarchy as there was with "in", no collaborative partnership between equal but separate entities as there was with "with." Person and environment are one and the same, indivisible expressions of the same Creation.

From the literature on conservation, I find two labeled approaches for understanding the relationship between humans and the natural environment: the imperialist approach and the arcadian approach (Russell, 1994). The imperialist approach, currently dominant in Western thinking and institutions, has "stripped nature of its spiritual meaning describing it merely as that which ought to be controlled for human development" (p. 16). I find this description to be applicable to the process discussed

earlier whereby robust notions of spirituality and the environment have been limited to qualities found within the individual person and expressed through their social interactions. Through the arcadian approach, on the other hand, meaning can be found in nature which has intrinsic value and involves a responsibility for "protection of the non-human for something beyond economic value" (p. 16). From this arcadian perspective, extinction of a species becomes a spiritual loss for all of us, not simply an entry in some biological inventory. Conservation is about providing and supporting options for life, belonging, and relationships between humans and the non-human world.

It is in our relationship with the non-human world that Russell (1994) finds "spiritual common ground" (p. 17), a notion that brings this paper full circle. It seems that this Earth we inhabit is literally our "common ground." We do not have to create it as the conference theme suggests. We have only to re-discover it (and ourselves), to celebrate Creation, and to inhabit this common ground fully and responsibly.

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