



Workshop: Learning sustainability! Social Work course contents promoting environmental, economic and social sustainability

Themes of sustainability and ecosocial approach in the MA theses of the Finnish Social Work students

Aila-Leena Matthies

University of Jyväskylä, Finland

EASSW Conference, Paris June 2017

Background: Social Work connections with the three pillars of Sustainable development





Theses on SW practice, Education and Research contributing to sustainability

- SW is a professional practice that faces at the first front the consequences of environmental, economic and social unsustainability?
 - SW has a significant role in fighting against these challenges and in supporting people to develop pathways to overcome them
- = > The environmental / sustainability paradigm of SW is mostly growing from level of practice
- Education of SW has a significant role for the awareness of SW to contribute to sustainability
 - However, the research-base of this paradigm is not yet very well developed, therefore the contribution of SW is not yet taken seriously



Context in Finland: Research as a core content of learning SW

- Research is an essential part of the Social Work curriculum at the six Finnish Universities with SW Education
- 3 years Bachelor studies of Social Work does not yet admit the qualification to work as Social Worker
- Additional 2 years Master studies of Social Work are required for the qualification as professional Social Worker
- MA has a strong research orientation
- Free choice of the topics of the MA thesis, however mainly focusing on the mainstream case work practice of SW or issues of service structures
- To write the MA thesis related to sustainability is mainly connected to personal interest, critical thinking towards mainstream SW or interest to develop new practice
- During the last 5 years 18 SW MA theses around ecosocial approach and sustainability has been completed at the 6 universities. (Publication project with Prof. Kati Närhi)

Examples of recent MA theses related to sustainability themes

- Taija Nöjd 2016: Systematic Literature Review on Social Work Considering Environmental Issues and Sustainable Development. (in English)
<http://urn.fi/URN:NBN:fi:juu-201612205206> : a new ecosocial work is growing, integrating sustainability in the interventions of SW
- Merja Leppäaho 2016: Nature-assisted care work. The development and critical issues of the agency of the care-workers involved. Three types of agencies could be identified: nature-talented, professional pioneers and eco-critical change-makers.
- Jaana Goman 2017: Ecosocial Social Work and Organic Farming: possibilities for joint change-making? Comparative analysis how societal change/ transition towards more sustainable society is understood in both paradigms. Ecosocial SW and organic farming have quite similar aim about the needed societal change.
- Marianne Väyrynen 2017: Sustainable life style as a project of agency (Working title): reflective thinking as a process of *internal discussion* of the person between one's own commitment to follow sustainable life style and the factors given by the context (theory by Margaret Acher).

Conclusions

At the moment the research of the students of the Finnish SW are mainly focusing in their MA theses on

- the theoretical-conceptual development of the paradigm
- the use of nature for improving wellbeing, nature 'therapy for heavy alcohol abuse, Green Care applications
- Community-based and structural SW, community work from an ecosocial perspective, political dimensions of SW

> Less MA theses done related to direct environmental conflicts or crises

In doctoral and post-doctoral research themes of sustainability are more obvious