

Final Report

January 2014

Project Title:

Rights Practice in the Biosphere: Testing a model of social work practice across diverse international contexts.

Chief Investigator: Sue Bailey *University of Western Australia*

Co-Investigator: Ernest Chui *University of Hong Kong*

Co-Investigator: Nada Eltaiba *Qatar University*

Executive Summary:

This project introduced a new model, "Rights Practice in the Biosphere", for social work education and practice to social work academics in three diverse international contexts. The model expands common understandings of ecological social work to include the physical environment. Fifteen social work academics from Universities in Australia, Hong Kong and Qatar were interviewed about the usefulness/relevance of the model for their own teaching and practice. Key findings that emerged from the research include: a universal recognition of the connection between human well-being and the health of the biosphere; mixed responses on the question of social work's responsibility for the health of the biosphere; and some uncertainty about how the biosphere can be integrated into their current teaching. Whilst the model was identified as an important first step in developing teaching and learning materials that will facilitate engagement with the biosphere as context, there was a hunger for examples of curricula and practice case studies that demonstrate how this could occur. This project also facilitated an international collaboration of three social work academics who continue to work together in order to support social workers to live and work in ways that actively contribute to the health of the biosphere.

1.0 Rationale and purpose of the project:

1. Introduce and pilot a model of social work practice "Rights Practice in the Biosphere" to social work academics in three postcolonial contexts.
2. Ascertain in what ways the model can provide social workers with a framework to identify what contextual factors are important and present to enable social workers to respond to environmental concerns.
3. Lay the groundwork for continued international education and practice collaboration between social workers in Hong Kong, Qatar and Western Australia.

2.0 Description of the process of implementation:

The process of implementation of this project is connected to the processes required in order to conduct research across three countries.

2.1 Project Administration:

The establishment of the project included;

- Establishing administrative processes to facilitate the payment of research staff and ongoing grant management. This was a complicated process as there are extra processes required for international collaborations and distributing income to research partners.
- Setting up a Dropbox Shared Folder to store documents for all to access
- Communication occurred via email in the first instance and then Skype was used once technological requirements were met.

2.2 Establishment of project

- Preparing the required documentation for the research process. This included;
 - Locating research assistants in three contexts
 - Designing and preparing the information sheet, consent forms, call for participants and interview guide
 - Applying for ethics approval from the University of Western Australia and ensuring that the ethics processes for all Universities were met.

2.3 Lessons learned

- The importance of thinking about the extra processes required for international collaborations. In particular the complexity of administering a project across three Universities (all giant bureaucracies with different ways of doing things).
- To ensure that the University requirement for Infrastructure costs are incorporated into grant applications in the future.

3.0 Project Implementation:

Once the administrative processes were completed the research processes were begun.

3.1 Recruitment

It was decided early on in the project that social work academics who are currently working in Universities in all three countries would be recruited. There were a number of reasons behind this decision and these are detailed below. It is also important to emphasise that this process meant that academics already interested in the health of the Biosphere were interviewed.

3.1.1 Costs

The first was related to keeping costs of the project down. The need for translation of the research documents was negated by the fact that the participants are social work academics who have competent English reading skills. Dr. Chui from Hong Kong and Dr. Eltaiba from Qatar both indicated that there was no need for translation of documents in this process.

3.1.2 Influence

Social work academics are located in influential positions in all three countries and have access to both students and social workers who could be involved in future research projects. It is also more likely that opportunities to reflect upon and think about their teaching would translate into some immediate changes.

3.1.3 Further involvement

It is anticipated that some social work academics may be interested in participating in further research and developing their own research projects related to the area. For example applying the model in their teaching.

3.2 Processes

There were a number of processes that were necessary in order to implement the project.

3.2.1 Technology

At the outset it was necessary to set up a means for clear communication across all three countries. Email was used in the first instance, with Skype used to facilitate meetings on the dates listed below.

- Skype Meetings

23rd November 2012 Discussion of process of coding

31st January 2013 Discussion of collaborative coding results.

TEAM SKYPE



The process of conducting a Skype meeting requires some consideration here. This is not a straightforward process and one that the researchers had limited experience in a professional/research context. Added to this was the fact that these were Skype meetings with three and sometimes four people involved. We soon realised that technology is inherently unreliable and for some meetings there was a time delay and the screen froze (a disconcerting event). This meant, for one meeting, there was no picture for one participant.

Given the potential for these technological failings the team ensured that a clear agenda was established and an undertaking given to complete task at least a few days prior to the meeting. This was not always achieved by all team members for a range of reasons including; personal matters, work-loads, Ramadan etc. Once the foibles of technology and individual interruptions were dealt with, it became clear that small group facilitation skills were important in managing the Skype meetings. We have, despite these challenges, built a team of international researchers who have developed trust in one another and who are committed to continuing working together to develop this research project further.

- o Access to Project Material via Dropbox

Dropbox was used and all project materials were stored in the IASSW Folder. This was a particularly useful way in which to manage the documents and to share information. There are some, as yet, unresolved questions about the Confidentiality of the data that requires some follow up.

3.3 Project research

3.3.1 Methodology

A qualitative research methodology was used as the aim of the research was to seek the opinions of social work academics on the Rights Practice in the Biosphere model.

3.3.2 Data Collection

An interview guide was developed and distributed to all research team members. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in all three countries. Each investigator took responsibility for conducting five interviews in their own country. In total, 15 academics were interviewed to ascertain the usefulness of the model for social work education and practice. A summary of each interview was completed and provided to all participants for comment and additions if required. This process enabled the participants to check for accuracy and also to add new thoughts etc.

3.3.3 Analysis

The notes and transcripts of the interviews were analysed twice using a 2 step coding process. The first round of coding developed preliminary codes where the text was described. The second round of coding interpreted the preliminary coding and drew conclusions and categories.

Interviews	First Coding	Second Coding
Hong Kong	Ernest Chui	Sue Bailey
Australia	Sue Bailey	Nada Eltaiba
Qatar	Nada Eltaiba	Ernest Chui

3.4 Lessons Learned

- Be prepared for technological failures and provide materials etc ahead of schedule.
- There are particular processes which can be used when meeting virtually and there is likely to be some research and information which can assist develop these skills further.
- Don't give up on the processes. Respectful and thoughtful responses ensure that team building and trust develops.
- Attend to confidentiality issues when working virtually. Privacy and Confidentiality require extra attention in the electronic era.

4.0 Outcomes

4.1 Awareness Raising

4.1.1 Space for reflection

This project enabled a total of 18 social work academics the space and time to consider how they think about the connection between human well-being and the health of the biosphere and how they can incorporate these understandings into their teaching and research. The provision of a model in which to begin the conversations has been an important contribution to their thinking.

4.1.2 Presentations

A number of presentations were made to a variety of audiences over the period of the grant.

1. Conference Presentation at the Social Work Social Development 2012: Action and Impact Conference held in Stockholm 8-12 July 2012. Unfortunately this paper was scheduled in an unrelated session which meant that there was very little engagement with the ideas discussed. See Appendix for Powerpoint Presentation
2. Preliminary findings of this research project were presented in a discussion at the eco-social work symposium held in Brisbane in January 2013. This presentation generated a lot of interest from the group (Australian social work academics) who are very keen to hear about the results of this project.
3. Two presentations were made to social work students at two universities in Western Australia. The feedback from the students was overwhelmingly positive. Below is an example of the feedback received. As highlighted in the executive summary there is a palpable hunger in students, academics and social workers to know more about how social workers can work to ensure the health of the Biosphere.

As a social worker one of the ways I would incorporate these principles into my practice would be to work in a way that raises consciousness about the environment and our responsibility to seek and promote sustainability in the community environment (Bailey, 2013). The Earth Charter also resonates with me in that it supports human rights by valuing community members lived experiences, inspires hope, social inclusion and is anti-discriminatory (Bailey, 2013). However, this is the first time in four years at university that I have encountered eco-social work concepts. I think it would be helpful for future students to approach these epistemologies earlier on in the course. Bailey (2010, p.23) makes a good point when she suggests "community eco-social work is grounded in communities and carried out by community workers..." and worker's take an holistic approach by valuing the environment as well as individuals in a way that highlights structural effects on communities. Therefore, the way I understand eco-social work practice is the values, principles, practices and frameworks of social work need to take into account the importance of our earth and its sustainability (Bailey, 2010, p.25).

STUDENT ONE

My views began to change quickly as I had never thought of social work/community development as a profession with such an emphasis on the natural world and how lack of awareness and respect for the environment can impact on relationships and systems in society. I began to reflect and become aware of my own place in nature, what I have been doing that could impact on ecological and social systems and encouraged me to question what activities I could change (within my personal and professional life) to enhance and improve my relationships with the environment and with others (Bailey, 2010, p.15). I soon began to realize I had not given it much thought of how much I was "taking" from the environment and not giving back or preserving what already exists (Jones, 2010, p.70) and that I had only viewed my social work views and practice as being "person in environment" as working alongside individuals in social environments such as family, community and political structures (Bailey, 2010, p.5).

STUDENT TWO

4.2 Relationship Building

The relationships between the three main investigators have strengthened and there are plans to continue the collaboration through further research, grant applications and writing.

Other connections have been made to 15 social work academics who work and live in a number of countries with many expressing an interest in working together on future projects. This will provide us with ongoing opportunities to engage in international conversations and collaborations about social work's responsibilities and responses to global challenges.

4.3 Materials

The materials that have been developed are connected to the research process and are included as Appendices

- The Model with Explanatory Notes
- Two Powerpoint Presentations

4.4 To be completed

- Feedback of the key findings to participants
- Recruitment for further research. Are participants willing to participate further in the research eg focus groups and actual introduction of model to teaching processes
- Development of a journal article for submission to the International Social Work journal. This article is still in the process of being written with completion expected in June 2014.

4.5 Future collaborations

This research can be easily replicated in a number of settings as all the research documentation and processes have been created. The research team will continue their collaborations with the following projects planned.

- All three research investigators will apply the model to their teaching and then write a reflective paper on the process incorporating feedback from students.
- Replicate the study with social workers actively practicing in all countries
- A UWA Collaboration grant is in the process of development with submission required by the end of June 2014.

4.6 Other Issues:

This project has been delayed by one year. This is because the workload of the Chief Investigator increased unexpectedly in 2013 due to a sudden death.

5. Conclusions:

This project has facilitated and enabled social work academics across the world to begin conversations about how to include the biosphere in their teaching and research. The Rights Practice in the Biosphere model provides a useful way for social workers to move their teaching and practice into the boarder contexts in which we exist - the Biosphere. Most participants were very engaged in the idea of including this in their teaching but would like examples of teaching curricula and practice case examples that provide some guidance for them. Finally I would like to thank the IASSW for this grant which has facilitated a most important collaboration and enabled the introduction of the Rights Practice in the Biosphere Model to social workers in Universities. This has been an extremely rewarding project that has encouraged me to move outwards from my nation state and engage with colleagues across the world.

Appendices

Key Themes to emerge from the research

1. All social work academics in all three contexts indicated that there was a clear connection between human well-being and the health of the Biosphere.
 - a. There were diverse ways of construing the connections and these were connected to individual meaning making with the following referenced;
 - i. Socialisation - What is learned Cultural, Family, Individual
 - ii. Spiritual - Islam, Australian Aboriginal, Cosmology
 - iii. Epistemologies – Ways of making meaning about the world
 - iv. Landscape eg Hong Kong (Urbanised environment) Qatar (Desert and Heat)
2. There were questions about whose responsibility it is to maintain the health of the Biosphere through addressing the causes of environmental degradation, pollution, biodiversity and species loss, and the impacts of climate change.
 - a. Not social work's responsibility
 - i. These are personal values not teaching social work
 - ii. Someone else is doing it (?)
 - iii. No flexibility in curriculum
 - iv. Curriculum too crowded already - another 'ism
 - b. It is social work's responsibility
 - i. And is taught
 - Indirectly – through community development, global issues, death studies, human rights, corporate social responsibility, Indigenous understandings
 - Directly – linking sustainability (Qatar curriculum links to sustainable development unit taught in 1st year)
 - ii. However not sure how to incorporate it into the social work curriculum
 - Crowded and an 'ism
 - c. Ways to incorporate the broader context into their own teaching were explored during the interview
 - i. with some recognising that they are doing it already – this model provided a language for what they are doing
 - ii. discovering ways that they could easily be integrated
3. The model provides a way in which to think about and engage with the Biosphere as context for practice.
 - a. Assessment of the problem - requires critical thinking and robust debates in assessment processes expand to (ecosocial assessment)
 - i. Disconnection from nature (in the West there is a disconnection from food and land)
 - ii. Capitalism views the environment as an externality therefore the health of the Biosphere is unimportant
 - iii. Individualisation processes
 - b. Intervention
 - i. How can social work respond to the threats to the health of the biosphere?
 - ii. Assist in reconnection of social and ecological
 - iii. The Earth Charter provides a clear rights framework which is consistent and complementary to social work values

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- iv. Values are consistent with social work values eg Specifically the Earth Charter
- v. There are ongoing questions about how social work can engage with this