Environmental Responsibility: A Social Justice Mandate for Counseling

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Abstract
The author discusses how an invisible veil obscures environmental concerns and their inherent relationships to the profession of counseling, articulating three themes for counseling as a profession and practice: environmental responsibility is related to well being, is the overarching issue of the 21st century, and is vital to social justice.

Lee and Walz (1998), former president of the American Counseling Association and Director of the ERIC Counseling Clearinghouse, respectively, have convincingly argued that action for social justice is a mandate for counselors. Likewise, the ACA multicultural competencies and the recently endorsed ACA resolutions on social justice make it clear that “social justice” is the “deep structure of multicultural counseling,” a reality that “many people who view themselves as multicultural advocates have lost sight of or perhaps never really understood” (D’Andrea & Daniels, 2006, p. 44). Unfortunately, social injustice work is still largely ignored in counselor education and academia. Graduate student Talka (2003) wrote in CSJ Activist, “It is not uncommon for some graduate programs to leave the element of social justice to a minimum, if not leave it out completely” (p. 5). This paper will describe how one social justice issue, environmental responsibility, unduly has been left out of the domain of counseling.

At a most basic level, there is a relationship between environmental responsibility and subjective and physical well being. Networking the Worldwide Fund for Nature and the new economics foundation, Shah et al. (2005) offer a review of the relationship of well-being and healthy natural environments. They describe studies that have found cross-culturally that people prefer natural landscapes to built ones. Natural environments within urban areas are associated with, and in at least one case caused, increased social ties, the strongest factor associated with life satisfaction. Green spaces encourage greater use of the outdoors, gathering of larger groups, monitoring of urban areas against crime, and supervision of children. Likewise, environmental responsibility also fosters counseling behaviors and intentions such as empathy, altruism (Mayer & Frantz, 2004; Schultz, Gouveia, Cameron, Tankha, Schmuck, & Franek, 2005).

Natural environments have been shown to build resiliency. For example, a study looking at disturbing circumstances in films that were followed by exposure to natural or built environment showed a clear recovery effect for those exposed to the natural environment (Van der Berg, Koole & Van der Wulp, 2003). Environmental responsibility also increases resilience to mental fatigue, aggression and violence when comparing residents of buildings with and without significant green space. Natural environments increase human longevity, speed recovery from illness, lower blood pressure, reduce stress and painkiller doses and help hospital staff perceive patients as more cooperative (Shah et al., 2005). The World Health Organization (2005) has shown that air pollution with particulate matter reduces lifespan of the average European citizen by 8.6 months. Economic well being is also associated with high quality natural environments (Shah et al., 2005). The duration and quality of children’s learning and creative and cooperative play appear to have an association to exposure to trees and grass (Shah et al., 2005). Zidansek (2006) describes cross-
cultural data from over 100 countries that shows a “strong correlation between the environmental sustainability index and the subjective well being index” (p. 2). Stated simply, happier countries are more environmentally responsible.

Not only is it related to well-being, many experts view environmental responsibility as “the major social issue of the present century” (Mayer & Frantz, 2004). Regrettably the social salience of environmental responsibility is hidden by an invisible veil that also conceals multicultural worldviews and the salience of social justice as the domain of counseling. Equally important, environmental irresponsibility disproportionately and devastatingly effects oppressed groups (Chokor, 2004; Lipsitz, 2005) and hides how connection to nature reflects many global minority viewpoints (Chokor, 2004; Sue & Sue, 2003). While more comprehensive sources of information on environmental problems and conservation attempts are widely available (i.e. Oskamp, 2000; www.nature.org, http://www.seafriends.org.nz/issues/threats.htm#humans), the intent of this article is to show how environmental responsibility is an overlooked but vital to the themes and practice social justice counseling. It is also a call to the profession to take notice and a stand to no longer neglect and thereby unknowingly support the negative social and ecological effects of environmental destruction.

Invisible Veil

Sue and Sue (2003) have discussed how an invisible veil hides unintentional racism, sexism, and homophobia. They assert that these structural and personal variables “may ultimately be the most insidious and dangerous” oppression and represent “perhaps the greatest obstacle to a meaningful movement toward a multicultural society” (Sue & Sue, 2003, p. 72) as the invisible veil is propagated by pervasive social conditioning. The multicultural competencies fortunately now challenge counselors to confront the invisible veil in order to raise awareness, understand diverse worldviews, and offer culturally relevant prevention and intervention. I suggest that an invisible veil functions to keep environmental issues and their additive effects to other diversity issues out of awareness with similar implications for the practice of counseling. Equally as important, the invisible veil undermines counselors’ attempts to be educators for their communities.

Counselors for Social Justice defines its mission as seeking “equity and an end to oppression and injustice” through “challenging oppressive systems of power and privilege,” “implementing social action strategies,” “disseminating social justice scholarship,” “maintaining an active support network,” “providing lively professional development,” and “maintaining social justice advocacy resources online” (http://www.counselorsforsocialjustice.org/mission.html). Among other excellent sources, Kiselica and Robinson (2001) give a review of the development and issues involved in social justice counseling. While social justice needs more integration into the training of counselors to prevent supporting the oppressive status quo, it also needs to appreciate the fundamental role of conservation in the development of justice. While social justice concerns have traditionally involved the oppression of people based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, ability, age, and the interaction of these and similar cultural attributes, the environmental irresponsibility of mainstream culture as a central oppression has been left largely unexamined. Environmental responsibility is vital to improving the lives of all people and oppressed groups in particular.

Howard (1993b, 2000), Winter (2000) and others have discussed how promoting certain information while withholding other information obscures the reality of environmental situations. News coverage is a classic example, where sensationalistic stories may distract viewers from ongoing destructive patterns. For example, the devastating effects of Katrina were covered in
depth while ongoing contributors to poverty, racism, and climate change are rarely addressed directly. Such obscured information leads to inadequate action. For instance, while many people have nobly responded to help hurricane survivors, they are slower to make social justice and environmental sustainability concerns a primary focus in their professional work, charitable giving and personal lives. Similarly, Winter (2000) has shown how visual dependency, institutional collusion, and neurological tendencies towards habituation promote obfuscation of information. For example, since ozone deterioration and radioactive waste are out of sight, they stay out of persons' consciousness. Regarding institutional collusion, she offers the example of the U.S. Forest Service explicitly creating areas along travel routes to create an attractive landscape and keep ugly deforestation out of view. Habituation is seen when smog is not as perceivable to urban dwellers since it is experienced every day as it is for rural inhabitants visiting the city.

Howard (2000) also discusses specific culturally dominant but ecologically inappropriate beliefs which he terms “killer thoughts for a world with limits” (p. 515). These are the beliefs that perpetuate the invisible veil covering environmental realities. For example, these include, “Consumption will produce happiness” (retail therapy, shopping prevents job loss), the “future is to be deeply discounted… (Buy now—make no payments until next year, a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush),” “growth is good” (GDP must increase, more is better than less), and “paying less (for something) is better than paying more” (keep prices low) (Howard, 2000, p. 515). These assumptions structure reality to prevent environmental realities from being observed. Counselors have an opportunity if not a duty to challenge themselves and their students to maintain awareness and take action on environmental concerns. It is vital that counselors “conceptualize individuals in context” in research, education and practice (ACA, 2004, p.1).

Likewise, the media consistently pulls attention away from the ecological reality, and advertising drives the media. For example, nearly 100% of revenue from TV comes from advertising. Advertising tends to focus American thought on the individual and one’s fantasies about how products and services can make them happy. It downplays that society even exists and rarely if ever deals with environmental concerns. (See “Advertising and the End of the World” (Jhally, 1997) for an excellent, accessible synopsis of these issues.) Underlying many of Howard’s “killer thoughts” and the advertising industry is a dominant idea that unfortunately is also existent in each of the first “three forces” of psychotherapy: people strive to maintain and enhance themselves through hedonism (analytic), reinforcement (behavioral) or growth (humanistic). This individualistic view may represent the “most basic unexamined assumption about human nature” hidden by the invisible veil and a centerpiece to values that deny and/or denigrate environmental problems (Howard, 2000, p. 511). O’Hara and Wood (1983) poignantly describe this as “one of our most enduring myths—the myth of the individual,” arguing instead that we must be “attuned to collective need” for the survival of life (p. 103-104).

Likewise, core counseling journals and books largely ignore environmental concerns. For example, on February 2, 2006 the author conducted a PSYCINFO search of the Journal of Counseling & Development, the Journal of Multicultural Counseling and Development, Journal of Humanistic Counseling, Education & Development, and Counseling and Values using PSYCINFO’s “suggested terms” related to conservation behavior “(DE “Conservation (Ecological Behavior)” or (DE “Environmental Education”) or (DE “Environmental Psychology”)” and found no citations. A search of the indexes of Corey’s (2005) Theory and Practice of Counseling & Psychotherapy and Sue and Sue’s (2004) Counseling the Culturally Diverse, two of the most popular texts in the field, found no reference to the natural environment or conservation. Counseling needs to
pay attention to the human developmental and contextual issues associated with environmental realities. Counseling’s close cousin, counseling psychology, represented by the journals Counseling Psychologist and The Journal of Counseling Psychology, yielded only a little more concern. The Journal of Counseling Psychology had no references but Counseling Psychologist did one special issue in 1993 on ecocounseling (Howard, 1993a), yielding six articles, most of which are referenced in this paper. In contrast, the flagship journal of the American Psychological Association, American Psychologist, showed 45 citations. Likewise, The Journal of Environmental Psychology, the Journal of Environmental Education, and the Handbook of Environmental Psychology (Bechtel & Churchman, 2002) are excellent sources for information on eco-counseling practice with over a thousand relevant articles/chapters. It may be important to note that a sub-field named conservation psychology is more closely linked with environmental responsibility. Conservation psychology has a specific purpose and value base—sustainability; environmental psychology is the study of relationships between people and their natural and built environments (Clayton & Brook, 2005).

The Major Social Issue of the 21st Century: Sustainability

Oskamp (2000) asserts that “the sustainability of human life on Earth in the future is in danger” and describes how overpopulation and overconsumption contribute to “potentially cataclysmic,” interconnected environmental problems, such as climate change, ozone depletion, toxic water and air, toxic chemical exposure, deforestation, species extinction, and exhaustion of non-renewable resources (p. 496). Climate change has now reached a degree of evidence well beyond the threshold of statistical significance, and the preponderance of evidence suggests a likely increase in the rate of warming during this century (Fomby & Vogelsang, 2001). Even data backdating to 160,000 years ago show that the climate change of today is extreme and potentially catastrophic in proportions. Ozone depletion has contributed to the greenhouse effect, skin cancer and damage to plants and animals, most notably the plankton that represent the foundation of the ocean food chain. International agreement in 1987 to ban ozone-destroying chemicals may resolve this environmental problem by 2050 and represents a large-scale environmental intervention success (Oskamp, 2000).

Still, nearly 80% of the world’s forests have been destroyed. Over 10000 species a year are becoming extinct, a rate of 1,000-10,000 more than that which is projected to happen naturally (Quinn, 2006). Though most biodiversity exists in rainforests and coral reefs, the United States has the largest percentage of its plant species (29%) that are endangered of any country (Walter & Gillet, 1997). Biodiversity has great potential as a source for human food and medicine beyond its intrinsic value. Nearly 70% of fish species have declined through overfishing and the world reached its maximum are of grain-growing 25 years ago with decreases happening each year since. Acid rain accounts for over a $30 billion of damage to the forests of Europe alone each year. Over a quarter of the world’s population in developing countries do not have access to clean water (Oskamp, 2000). Likewise, over 25 million people a year in China alone have to migrate due to water shortages, resulting in psychological and career transitions. Air pollution is responsible for 3 million deaths per year (Fishchowitz-Roberts, 2002). Toxic chemical exposure appears to have resulted in a 50% decrease in worldwide sperm during the last 50 years, contributing to infertility counseling needs (Oskamp, 2000).

The important aspect of this sampling of facts is that there is a crisis that requires the attention of everyone, including counselors. Most environmental concerns are caused by and contribute to human development, psychopathology, and multicultural issues. Environmental responsibility can
help counselors and counselors-in-training more accurately conceptualize the stresses, losses, and transitions in their clients' lives. Counselors can help to prevent suffering through a more active engagement in environmental education, activism and organizational change, especially in advocating for environmental social justice.

Environmental Irresponsibility: A Core Issue of Social Justice

Oppression of Biodiversity is Worst Where Oppressed Groups Reside

Oppressed groups suffer the most from the dangerous relationship between mainstream culture and the natural world. Neighborhoods of minority cultures, especially African-Americans, function geographically as barrier islands for white neighborhoods as was seen by the urban/suburban divide with regards to damage to the community of New Orleans. The government has repeatedly left these areas unprepared either for primary or secondary prevention against natural and industrial disasters. The bayou southeast of New Orleans, like much of coastal Bangladesh, had been disappearing at rates visible to the human eye within the timeframe of only minutes. There are many other examples where habitat fragility is most felt by people of color (e.g. the tsunami of South Asia from Christmas of 2004, the deleterious effects of global warming on habitat destruction and fish-borne toxins in the breast milk of Eskimo populations, agricultural production in much of Africa, etc). Socio-political forces also collide with environmental degradation to exponentially perpetuate suffering and death. For example, there are currently 18 countries that have active exterminating genocides which are worsened through environmental problems, especially lack of clean water (www.genocidewatch.org).

Lipsitz (2005), corroborated in part by Shah, Peck, and Murphy (2005), thoroughly discusses how environmental abuse disproportionately hurt people of color. For instance, minority groups appear to bear the brunt of the (mis)handling of American toxic waste as found in The Environmental Protection Agency’s investigation of 1,177 toxic waste cases, which reported that polluters received fines 500% higher in white neighborhoods than those with a majority of people of color. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry recorded in 1988 that nearly twice as many poor black children (2/3) than poor white children (1/3) had excess lead in their blood. In Los Angeles, twice as many blacks and Latinos as whites live in areas with the most polluted air. For example, 71% of blacks in L.A. live in areas with the most polluted air. The living areas of Native Americans, like African Americans, are among the most targeted areas for the locating of waste storage, especially nuclear waste. So it is especially poignant to find that Navajo teenagers present with reproductive cancers, known to be related to toxic exposure, at a rate 17 times higher than the average American teenager (Lipsitz, 2005).

Not just the most toxic, but also, more common waste also gets “dumped” on minorities. For example, in Houston, the multicultural “American” town, 100% of the public garbage dumps are located in black neighborhoods. When looking at the US as a whole, more than 60% of blacks and Latinos live in communities with insufficiently controlled toxic waste sites. When income, education and employment are statistically controlled, race continues to be the most significant single factor associated with the location of waste facilities. Race also predicts exposure to contaminated fish, with Alaskan Natives being particularly hard hit given their reliance upon fishing as a way of life. Environmental racism affects not only quality of life, but is responsible for many, many deaths each year. As many as 75,000 fewer African Americans are estimated to die each year due to these oppressors (Lipsitz, 2005). Polluted air alone is responsible for as many as 60,000 deaths in the US each year (http://www.seafriends.org.nz/issues/threats.htm). There is also evidence that
negative poverty cycles are harder to resolve without improving the local natural environments (Chokor, 2004; Shah et al., 2005). In a Canadian study, a community that transformed a dump to a community garden saw a 30% drop in crime in one summer.

Another social justice impact of environmental responsibility is the externalization of costs, whereby capitalists profit at the expense of native and minority peoples. Externalization is the process by which a seller reduces the real cost of producing a good or service through irresponsible means, causing the local and/or global community to bear the actual cost of production. For example, the money by which this country was built came from the externalized costs of the land stolen from Natives and the labor of Africans. Today, clothes that are manufactured by slaves (or near slaves) in China and sold in the United States at Wal-Mart or other merchants to a majority of Americans do not account for the immeasurable cost to the quality of life of slaves, the local economy, the damaging effects of coal used to run machinery, among other examples. To offer actual economic calculations of the injustice of externalization, “the true cost of a hamburger from cattle raised on cleared rainforest is $200” (Winter, 2000, p. 518). Likewise,

[The] net present value lost from 1k2 of degraded reef in the Philippines compared to productive reef over 25 years (at 10 percent discount rate) is $86,300 from sustainable fisheries, $193,000 of forgone coastal protection and $482,000 of lost tourism—compared to $15,000 [net gain] from blast fishing (Shah et al., 2005, p. 5).

As Chokor (2004) has advocated, “Social justice and fairness to communities was established to be critical to sustainable development in poor areas; resources must be harnessed such that they contribute directly to community asset building to improve socio-economic activities and protect the environment” (p. 305). There is a “general pattern of poverty, resource degradation and socio-economic survival activities” that are inherently related (Chokor, 2004, p. 310). Therefore, counseling as a profession and individual counselors can raise awareness of environmental issues as part of a social justice concern regarding how unsustainable practices disproportionately harm people of color through research agenda, education, and community measures.

Ecology Reflects Diverse Worldviews

Harrison, Wilson, Chan, Pine, and Buriel (1990) state that “individualism is incompatible with the ancestral worldviews of ethnic minorities” (p. 353). Many non-white worldviews are inherently ecological. Jackson & Sears (1992) describe an Africentric worldview:

There is an assumption then that everything is interrelated and interdependent. Therefore, harmony with nature, group orientation and interpersonal relationships are of prime importance and highly valued. ... Individuals cannot exist alone, but owe their existence to ancestors, those unborn, the entire community, and all of nature. (p. 186)

Many Native Americans tribes see life as an interconnected web where persons are not separate from biodiversity. Hazel and Mohatt (2001) write that many native worldviews have an inherent spirituality that is an “interconnected, central component of culture that addresses experiences and beliefs related to transcendence, [which] structures relationships with others and
the natural world and provides ways of finding meaning and achieving a sense of coherence” (p. 542). Asian worldviews often emphasize “harmony is the core of existence” (Harrison et al., 1990, p. 354). Similarly, Schultz, Uniban and Gamba (2000) write, “Latino environmentalism is characterized by a human-in-nature view: Humans are seen as an integral part of nature, rather than as its protectors or consumers” (p.22). Feminist perspectives also frequently value the relational, interconnected, and ecological premises supportive of environmental responsibility (Wolleat, 1993). Bronfenbrenner’s (1979) human ecological model offers an integrative multicultural worldview and how everyone is embedded in multiple socio-cultural contexts.

At one level, environmental responsibility is a matter of respecting diverse worldviews. At another level, it is pivotal to the growth and development of people holding or being influenced by these worldviews. Most importantly, it is precisely the worldviews of people of color that the dominant culture needs to survive. Counseling practice can “build upon strengths” of ethnic worldviews by advocating for them (ACA, 2004, p. 1). All Americans need ecological multicultural worldviews to survive the current environmental situation.

Ethnically diverse worldviews share a sense of interconnection pivotal to the survival of human and biodiversity. Individuals are parts of a whole. The land, the animals, the plants, and people don’t just co-exist but are symbiotic. One is meaningless and cannot sustain without the others. Ways of life in native populations around the world sustained the ecology and biodiversity of life for millions of years prior to the environmental threats of the last 100 years. Humans have used more resources in the last century than in the entire history of people. To me this hints at the spiritual and tragic reality that is lost in some contemporary counseling priorities (D’Andrea & Daniels, 2006). The soul of people as part of life, not separate from life, is missing when we do not practice with a full embrace of ancestral worldviews.

**Implications for Practice**

The author has discussed how environmental responsibility is the largest and one of the most hidden stories of our age yet is related to well being and a central social justice concern through the disproportionate impact on minorities and disrespect for ethnic worldviews environmental problems. Environmental responsibility presents many opportunities for practice. The American Counseling Association’s (2004) Public awareness ideas and strategies for professional counselors and Operationalizations of the Multicultural Competencies (Arredondo et al., 1996) provide a wealth of applicable ideas (For these and additional useful resources, see http://www.counseling.org/Resources/). Additionally, environmental responsibility requires intentional and committed effort to see past the invisible veil. Hence, the most important practice implication of environmental responsibility is building and maintaining integrative awareness. Another implication is to infuse ecological and minority worldviews into everything that counselors do and become. Counselors’ behaviors should convey respect for and understanding of the environmentally oppressive experiences endured by minorities (Sue & Sue, 2003) and build upon the ecological strengths of ancestral worldviews. Third, counselors need to network across disciplines, advocate politically, and engage in preventive efforts and other direct and indirect community level services (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, and D’Andrea, 2003). Even as it takes intentional commitment and active attempts to maintain awareness and respect for, ecological realities, practicing from a community counseling model is a transition requiring cooperative effort, training, and consultation. Fourth, when conceptualizing and designing interventions in both individual and systemic situations, counselors can incorporate the existential reality of the environmental situation and how environmental
sustainability fosters subjective and collective well being. For example, counselors can suggest and facilitate field trips to nature preserves and development-fostering participation in conservation organizations. Given the economic, educational, cross-cultural, interpersonal, and personal benefits of environmental sustainability, counselors in industrial, school, and other organizational settings are particularly well positioned to act responsibly towards the human-environment ecology and show how environmental problems impact the quality and endurance of life and culture in their areas. Finally, research and theory need to incorporate the salience of interconnection, diversity issues, and current, unsustainable environmental practices into their designs and discussions. As social justice movements have asserted, research and theory that exists in a vacuum of “the individual” is outdated and at potentially unethical.

Conclusion

This paper has endeavored to present counselors with a rationale for prioritization of environmental responsibility within the profession of counseling. The author discussed how an invisible veil obscures the salience of sustainability, and also explained how environmental sustainability is central to social justice through an understanding of the disproportionate impact on and disrespect of worldviews’ of ethnic minorities and their environments that is witnessed in environmental irresponsibility. Finally, the interdependence seen in ethnic minority worldviews and research on well being and ecology offer a compelling basis for a theoretical integration with the domain of social justice counseling. This article only offers a few poignant examples that hopefully will encourage practicing, training, and researching counselors to put social justice conservation very high among their priorities. It is counselors’ duty to “serve as educators for their communities” (ACA, 2004, p. 1) about a variety of wellness and developmental concerns, including sustainability. More discussion, research and advocacy must occur if the counseling profession is to prove as systemically responsible as we aspire to be.
References


