

2016

# Climate change and social work: Our roles and barriers to action

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Climate change and social work: Our roles and barriers to action

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THESIS  
Submitted to the Faculty of Social Work  
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
Master of Social Work  
Wilfrid Laurier University

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## Abstract

This qualitative research project was conducted using a grounded theory research methodology and was approached with the theoretical underpinnings of social constructivism and pragmatism. The purpose of this research was to assess what role, if any, that social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues such as climate change and what barriers, if any, they will likely experience as they engage with these issues. It is important to explore these roles and barriers because social work is a profession that is well equipped to mitigate environmental issues like climate change, yet there is virtually no social work presence in the literature on these issues. Key informants included six individuals who self-identified as social workers. Informants were interviewed over the phone for 45 to 60 minutes. Research questions focused on the roles that social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, as well as what barriers social workers are likely to experience in doing this work. Results indicated that social workers do have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, including as researchers, educators, clinicians, and community members, because doing so is a part of the social work mandate and because social workers possess the skills to help mitigate these issues. It was also found that there are a number of barriers and helping factors that contribute to social work (in)action on environmental issues like climate change. The central barrier identified was the cultural mindset of Western social work that views individuals as separate from the environment, which creates and maintains the other barriers and impacts the helping factors in negative ways. As such, an ideological shift is required in the social work profession to expand our understanding of the person-in-environment to include the physical environment, as well as the social environment, in order to encourage more social work action on environmental issues like climate change. To do this, social work research, practice, and education will need to better align itself with Indigenous worldviews and practices in a way that is inclusive to Indigenous peoples and that honours and acknowledges where these practices originate without appropriating or repackaging them.

*In dedication to Dr. Seuss:*

*Your words inspire me to do better each and every day.*

*Thank-you for reminding me that:*

*“Unless someone like you cares a whole awful lot, nothing is going to get better. It’s not.”*

*- The Lorax (Seuss, 1971, p. 58).*

## Acknowledgments

I would sincerely like to thank everyone who helped me along this journey. To my key informants: Thank-you for sharing your experiences and wisdom with me. This project would not have been possible without your sincere and candid reflections.

To my thesis advisers, Eliana Suarez and Gus Hill: Thank you for your guidance and support throughout this entire process. You were always readily available whenever I had questions and were very thoughtful and warm individuals to walk this journey alongside, providing resources, understanding, and humor to see me through. I want to thank-you for your sincere investment in me.

To my external adviser, Manuel Reimer: Thank-you for taking the time to review my thesis and sit on my committee. Your feedback and recommendations were invaluable. My thesis is strengthened overall due to your diligence and thoughtfulness. I hope to become the Manuel Reimer of social work and I thank-you for setting a wonderful example for me.

To my friends and colleagues who have been on this journey with me, Alexa Stovold and Eleanor McGrath: Thank-you for being a wonderful source of support and guidance throughout this process. Alexa, you have been a wonderful friend to me with many phone calls and self-care dates. Eleanor, you have been my keeper of knowledge in terms of due dates and requirements, not to mention hilarious thesis memes to keep us all smiling. I could not have asked for a better group to share this journey with. Thank-you.

To my cousin and best friend, Randy Nicholas: You have always been my support touchstone. I want to thank-you for diligently and thoughtfully editing my thesis without hesitation but, rather, with great delight. You are one of the most brilliant people that I know. I am so lucky to have you in my life.

Finally, to my partner, Jamie, and daughter, Emma: Thank-you for your love, support, and sacrifices. I owe all of my success to you and your belief in me. Without you, I would not be where or who I am today. I love you both very dearly. I want to thank-you for always cheering me on and seeing me through the hardest and best of times. I could not have done this without you.

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## **Chapter I: Introduction**

Climate change has been discussed by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) (Rimmer & Phelan, 2014), world renowned physicist and best-selling author, Stephen Hawking (RTCC, 2012), and the United Nations Secretary General, Ban Ki-Moon (Sturmer, 2014), among others, as the single greatest natural threat to humanity that we currently face. It is now well understood that the key issue is not a lack of solutions to deal with climate change; rather, it is a lack of political will to put these solutions into action (Semeniuk & McCarthy, 2015). As the IPCC (2014b) concluded, we need a transformation in the broader social consciousness on these issues in order to put increasing pressure on governments to take the necessary and appropriate actions, which is a task that falls under the purview of social work when considering how the profession has been defined by regulatory bodies such as the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW, 2008). Nonetheless, social work has had almost no presence in the discourse on these issues, which is evident when conducting a key word search in the social work literature, Google, and Google Scholar.

### **Statement of the problem**

Climate change is a significant global threat to humanity that requires social work solutions and action, yet social work remains relatively silent on this issue in the broader discourse. For the purposes of this research, social work “action” refers to conducting research (macro), community development (meso), and clinical interventions (micro).

### **Purpose of the study**

This research sought to answer: What role, if any, can social workers play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change and what barriers, if any, are likely to limit their action

on these issues? The purpose in asking these questions was to determine what needed to be done to encourage more social work action on these issues.

### **Significance of the study**

Upon completion of this research, social workers will have a better understanding of the role that they can and should play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, which may encourage more social work action on an issue that has become increasingly dependent on social work solutions, potentially leading to the mitigation of climate change and other environmental issues globally.

### **Theoretical underpinnings**

This research is rooted in social constructivism and pragmatism. According to Creswell (2007), social constructivism is a theoretical framework that assumes that social reality is created through our interactions with the world around us. As such, there is no objective reality to discover; rather, there are many subjective realities that are coloured by the varied experiences of individuals. In order to determine the nature of something, we must determine how people assign meaning to it, based on their lived experiences. Pragmatism, on the other hand, refers to knowledge claims that are concerned with application or, in other words, deriving solutions to problems. The method of inquiry, as such, is not as important as the problem itself. In conducting this research, I was interested in determining what role social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, based on their lived experiences as social workers (social constructivism), in order to determine what can be done to encourage more social work action on these issues in the future (pragmatism).

## **Summary**

In summary, this thesis was designed to address the current lack of social work literature on environmental issues like climate change. The purpose was to determine what role social workers can play in dealing with these issues, as well as to determine what barriers may be limiting their action. The intention is to engage social workers with this topic, so that they may see the role that they can and must play in mitigating these issues.

This research was approached using social constructivist, pragmatist, and grounded theory perspectives and was qualitative in nature. This thesis is divided into six chapters: introduction, empirical and theoretical review, methodology, results, discussion, and conclusion. The empirical and theoretical review section outlines the main issues and research questions discussed here in more detail. The methodology section discusses how these questions were addressed in this research, which is followed by a detailed outline of how these questions were answered by the informants in the results section. The discussion section ties these findings back to the empirical and theoretical review and outlines the implications for social work education, practice, and research, as well as the limitations and conclusions of the current study.

## **Chapter II: Empirical and Theoretical Review**

In the following literature review, I briefly discuss what climate change is, some of the current effects it is having, and who is most affected by it, in order to highlight the pressing nature of this issue and to introduce the relevance of this issue to the social work profession. I then discuss some of the solutions that the IPCC (2014b) has recommended to deal with the issue of climate change, which I compare to the definition of the social work mandate, as outlined by the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers OCSWSSW (2008). This will demonstrate that taking action on environmental issues like climate change is within the purview of the social work profession. I conclude with a review of what social workers have said on this issue to date, as well as what social workers have done so far to mitigate the effects of climate change. As I will demonstrate, the answers to both of these questions are currently limited, which highlights the importance of this topic in social work and justifies the particular research questions addressed in this research.

### **Definition of climate change**

The IPCC was initiated by the United Nations in 1988 and is the forefront organization for tracking and researching climate change effects and potential solutions (Layton, 2006). It consists of thousands of researchers from six of the seven continents across the globe. In their most recent report, they defined climate change as: “a change in the state of the climate that can be identified (e.g., by using statistical tests) by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties, and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer” (IPCC, 2014a, p. 5). In this report, 71 researchers from 29 countries concluded that climate change is, without a doubt, producing effects across the globe that, if left untreated, by the year 2030, will

produce devastating and irreversible effects the world over (IPCC, 2014a). These effects include, but are not limited to: depleted food outputs, significant or complete loss of natural resources, destruction of entire habitats, displacement of people and wildlife, loss of biodiversity, loss of marine and coastal ecosystems, breakdown of infrastructure and critical services, and increased morbidity and death (IPCC, 2014a).

### **Impacts of climate change**

Currently, climate change is having several noticeable effects across the globe. I have chosen to focus on the effects that are most obviously associated with climate change, namely the increasing amount and intensity of extreme weather events around the world, from extreme heat to extreme rain and snowfall, all resulting in serious consequences for individuals, communities, and ecosystems.

#### ***Extreme heat***

In terms of extreme heat, there were several stories in 2015 and 2016 of record-breaking temperatures around the world, particularly in the Pacific Northwest of North America and Western Europe (Carlowicz, 2015a). As one example, in May 2015, a heat wave in India killed more than 1,400 people in one week as a result of dehydration and heat stroke (Valentine, 2015). Those most affected were elderly people, people without homes, and people who were working outside. At 122 degrees Fahrenheit, temperatures were hot enough to melt the roadways. As other examples, in August 2015, a car that was left in the sun over a few days melted in Italy (Readhead, 2015) and, in June 2015, at least 749 people died in Pakistan, both due to extreme heat (Jawad, 2015). In February 2016, many Canadian cities in Ontario exceeded heat records by one to seven degrees each (Bagley, 2016). In fact, weather records

show that temperatures have been steadily increasing in all major Canada cities over the past several decades (The Weather Network, 2013).

### ***Drought***

The increasing heat globally has led to significant droughts in some areas. For example, as of 2015, Brazil was entering the third year of its worst drought in a century (Carlowicz, 2015b). In 2014, a severe drought damaged over one million hectares of farmland in China (Reklev, 2014). In 2010, the most severe drought in Russian history was recorded (Kramer, 2010). Syria faced a similar situation between 2006 and 2010 when a severe drought converted 60 percent of its landmass into desert (NPR, 2013). In Canada, using the “Canadian Drought Monitor” (Government of Canada, 2015), it is clear that droughts have increased drastically in terms of intensity, frequency, and size between 2002 and 2015. In July 2005, Canada experienced some small patches of “abnormally dry” conditions across the country, with very few instances of “moderate drought.” By July 2010, abnormally dry conditions had spread across almost the entirety of British Columbia, Alberta, and Québec, nearly half of Saskatchewan and Ontario, and the central portion of Manitoba. Moderate drought had also increased in size and frequency. Additionally, we see the first patches of “severe drought” spread across B.C., Alberta, and Ontario. By July 2015, we see significantly more instances of abnormally dry conditions spreading up through the territories, as well as dramatically increased instances of moderate drought, severe drought, extreme drought, and the first instances of “exceptional drought” – the highest drought rating possible – throughout Canada. All of these instances, among the many others that are not discussed here, are a direct result of extreme heat events, which are gradually increasing in frequency and magnitude globally.



### ***Decreased food and water supply***

Extreme droughts have devastating impacts on global food production and supply, as well as the availability of drinking water. In Brazil, the drought reduced the drinking water reserves to 10 percent of capacity and negatively affected their vegetation yields (Carlowicz, 2015b). In China, the drought most severely affected the city of Henan, a massive producer of soybeans, barley, and rice worldwide, thereby reducing global exports significantly (Reklev, 2014). In Inner Mongolia, drinking water was removed from 300,000 citizens. In Russia, as a result of the drought, grain exports were banned in order to preserve food supply domestically, which drove up the global price of wheat by 90 percent (Kramer, 2010). In Syria, the drought resulted in the loss of 80 percent of their cattle livestock by the year 2009 (NPR, 2013). NPR (2013) argued that this was one of the main catalysts to breeding the civil war that is still happening in Syria today. Throughout Canada, many people have been feeling the pinch of rising food costs (Li, 2016), leading a significant number of people to reduce meat consumption (61%), reduce vegetable and fruit consumption (42%), and choose unhealthier, cheaper food alternatives (40%) (Ferrerias, 2016). Furthermore, more people are opting to eat at home, which has had negative impacts on local economies (Li, 2016).

As a result of extreme heat and droughts, food and water availability and access have been severely limited across the globe, driving up prices and, thereby, causing people to make less healthy choices when it comes to nourishing their bodies and families, as well as further limiting access to food and water by vulnerable and marginalized populations (Clapp, 2011; Clapp & Cohen, 2009; IPCC, 2014a), which has resulted in increased morbidity and mortality rates and war.

### ***Extreme precipitation***

In terms of extreme rain and snow, parts of the world have been experiencing a record frequency and intensity of rain and snowfall in recent years. According to the Union of Concerned Scientists (2011), a warmer climate leads to increased evaporation from the land and sea, which results in increased precipitation. When the weather reaches extreme levels, it sets the stage for severe precipitation.

In warmer climates, severe precipitation leads to extreme rainfall and, as a result, extreme flooding. According to Zhang (2016), major floods only used to happen once every hundred years. Now, major floods are occurring every ten to twenty years. In 2013, Alberta, Canada experienced what has been termed a “super flood” that affected a quarter of the entire province, resulting in the largest evacuation in Canada in sixty years (Government of Canada, 2014). Over 100,000 people were displaced from their homes. This was the costliest disaster in Canada’s history at six billion dollars. In 2014, Baltimore also experienced a severe flood that resulted in the collapse of an entire street, washing away cars and flooding the railroad tracks underground (Hermann, 2014). These examples highlight the destructive and costly nature of these kinds of extreme weather events.

In colder climates, severe precipitation leads to extreme snowfall. In 2015, Boston, USA, experienced its snowiest month on record (Almasy & Karimi, 2015). The massive amount of snowfall resulted in the collapse of an apartment complex roof, leaving 30 people displaced. Twenty miles South, in New Hampshire, a portion of a strip mall also collapsed in the same snowstorm. In December of 2015, Newfoundland, Canada also had a record amount of snowfall, resulting in power outages and closures across St. Johns (The Weather Network,

2015). In January 2016, New York, Washington, and Baltimore, USA, all received record levels of snowfall, at two to three feet of snow each, and Philadelphia also set a record, at just under two feet of snow, resulting in 48 deaths, power outages, buried vehicles, coastal flooding, beach erosion, and roof collapses (Rathbun, 2016).

These are just a few of the many examples that are beyond the scope of this paper that highlight the consequences of the increasing amount and intensity of extreme weather events from heat waves to snowstorms. According to the CDC (2015), an increasing amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere has resulted in rising global temperatures, leading to more extreme weather events and a rising sea level. Overall, climate change has resulted in increasing extreme heat, severe weather, air pollution, allergens, and environmental degradation; decreasing water quality and water and food supply; and changes in vector ecology. All of these changes have had significant and devastating effect on ecosystems, communities, and individuals.

### ***Impacts on ecosystems, communities, and individuals***

In terms of ecosystems, many species have shifted their activities, geographic ranges, migration patterns, and species interactions, which have led to significantly higher rates of species extinctions (IPCC, 2014a). In terms of communities, as discussed, climate change induced extreme weather events have negatively affected food and water security and have led to very costly disasters. In terms of individuals, climate-induced weather changes have led to increased morbidity and mortality. According to the CDC (2015), climate change has already led to an increasing amount of heat-related illnesses, injuries, mental health issues, and deaths due to extreme weather, as well as increasing asthma and cardiovascular disease due to air

pollution. There has also been an increasing amount of reported cases of malaria, dengue, encephalitis, hantavirus, Rift Valley fever, Lyme disease, chikungunya, and West Nile virus due to changes in vector ecology, as well as increasing cases of cholera, cryptosporidiosis, campylobacter, leptospirosis, and harmful algae blooms due to water quality impacts. In addition, there have been increases in reported cases of malnutrition and diarrheal disease due to water and food supply impacts, as well as increased forced migration, civil conflict, and mental health impacts due to environmental degradation. According to McMichael (2015), extreme weather events result in increasing infectious disease outbreaks as “microbes, vectors and reservoir animal hosts exploit the disrupted social and environmental conditions of extreme weather events” (p. 543). These outbreaks affect the air, land, and water, which, in turn, affect the food supply. Humans become increasingly susceptible to climate-related disease and death, as a result.

### ***Impacts on marginalized populations***

Another important finding that came out of the most recent report from the IPCC, is that the effects of climate change disproportionately affect society’s most vulnerable populations, including those who are marginalized socially, politically, culturally, economically, institutionally, or otherwise (IPCC, 2014a). Namely, these populations experience more displacement, morbidity, and mortality as a result of the effects of climate change. Indeed, some of these effects are already being realized. For example, the people of Tuvalu have been cited as the “world’s first climate refugees” (Mellino, 2016). Over one-fifth of the 11,000 Tuvaluans have been displaced due to rising sea levels. According to Walia (2015): “Despite having the world’s highest greenhouse gas emissions per capita, Tuvalu’s neighbour, Australia,

has so far refused to accept Tuvaluans as climate refugees” (Para. 3). Tuvalu is one of the world’s poorest countries by GDP per capita, whereas Australia is one of the top twenty richest countries in the world (“List of countries,” 2016).

As another example, research conducted in Waterloo Region highlighted some of the issues that individuals experiencing homelessness face as a result of extreme weather, including: an inability to safely store their gear, leading to lost or damaged belongings; keeping dry in severe precipitation, particularly their feet; developing illnesses, including trench foot, pneumonia, flus, colds, dehydration, and sunstroke; social isolation, resulting in increased drug and alcohol use; and exacerbated mental health issues, particularly depressive symptoms (Wandel et al., 2014). According to this report, severe precipitation is expected to increase, thereby intensifying the impacts of these weather events on individuals experiencing homelessness. Furthermore, high temperature extremes are expected to increase over time in Waterloo Region, exacerbating heat-related issues and air pollution, negatively impacting the health of those who spend a lot of time outside and those with weakened immune and respiratory systems (i.e. individuals experiencing homelessness, the elderly, infants, individuals with respiratory illnesses such as asthma, individuals with immunodeficiency disorders such as AIDS, etc.).

Both of these examples offer pertinent findings to suggest that the issue of climate change falls under the purview of social work, a fact that becomes even more evident when looking at the suggested courses of action that the IPCC (IPCC 2014b) recently recommended to deal with the issue of climate change.

## **Potential solutions to climate change**

The major strategies that were put forth by the IPCC (2014b) for the mitigation of greenhouse gas emissions included actions from the individual level to the policy level. Solutions encompassed adaptation initiatives drawn from the knowledge of Aboriginal populations; a move toward renewable energy resources; fossil fuel divestment; mitigation measures for all transportation modes; infrastructure and urban redevelopment investments; industry improvements (reduce, reuse, recycle); and lifestyle, behavioural, and cultural changes. One of the most highlighted solutions was the need for a shift in the broader social consciousness. As the IPCC researchers see it, citizens need to put pressure on governments and businesses to make the necessary changes to mitigate the effects of climate change. It was argued that, in order for this to happen, members of society need to adopt certain ideals and values that reflect a unified vision for taking climate action, as climate policy planning at the government level is contingent upon this. Indeed, as Semeniuk and McCarthy (2015) pointed out: “the most significant barrier is not technical or economic, but a lack of political will” (Para 3).

In Canada, not much was done in the way of mitigating climate change during the last ten years, for which we were heavily criticized (Grandia, 2015; MacCharles, 2014). According to Environmental Defence (2015), Canada’s commitment pledge for the Paris climate summit was the weakest of all of the G7 countries. While the commitment agreed to meet the target of reducing Canada’s greenhouse gas emissions by 30 percent from the 2005 emissions level by the year 2030, it only committed certain sectors to meet this goal, excluding the highest greenhouse gas polluter in all of Canada – the Alberta tarsands, which have increased their

greenhouse gas emissions rate by 79 percent since 2005 (Grandia, 2015). As such, commitments made by the Canadian government to take action on climate change have been negligible for nearly a decade, which is problematic when considering that we have the tools available to mitigate this crisis.

According to a report by Semeniuk and McCarthy (2015), Canada could completely transition to renewable energy by the year 2035 and reduce 80 percent of our greenhouse gas emissions by mid-century, which is only one of the many recommendations put forth by the IPCC (2014b). However, if nothing is done beyond the mitigation measures we currently have in place, by the year 2030, it is predicted that there will be permanent and irreversible effects of climate change around the world (IPCC, 2014b). As the IPCC (2014b) stipulated, it is an issue of shifting the global social consciousness, which can be argued to be a task that falls under the purview of social work, especially when considering how the social work mandate has been professionally defined.

### **The social work mandate**

The roots of social work as a profession in Canada lie in the dawn of capitalism in the mid-1800s and the unfavorable conditions that were created for many citizens as a result, including low-wage and dangerous working conditions, unemployment, deplorable housing conditions, disease and illness, and rampant poverty (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). In response to these social crises, charitable Christian organizations, led predominantly by wealthy, White women, decided to take action, focusing initially on disadvantaged children and the chronically impoverished. Charitable Organization Society (COS) workers sought the efficient transfer of services to what they deemed to be the “deserving poor” using a casework approach, while

housing settlement workers advocated for improving the social and economic conditions that lead to social crises in the first place by using a community organizing and group work approach. After World War I, the war of the classes flourished, resulting in civil unrest, public outcry, and protests, which demanded more social work action than the early religious organizations could bear, and which demanded a different and secularized approach to social work, thereby planting the seeds for modern social work practice (Jennissen & Lundy, 2011). Fast forward to today and one can see that not much has changed from these early roots, as social workers continue to unravel the devastating impacts of capitalism, including poverty and systemic racism, sexism, classism, ableism, LGBTQIA+ discrimination, etc. The casework method for dealing with these issues is still the primary approach to social work practice. However, community development and policy still remain significant parts of the social work mandate, which is made clear in the way that regulatory bodies have professionally defined said mandate.

According to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW, 2008), the scope of social work includes “the assessment, diagnosis, treatment and evaluation of individual, interpersonal and societal problems through the use of social work knowledge, skills, interventions and strategies, to assist individuals, dyads, families, groups, organizations and communities to achieve optimum psychosocial and social functioning” (p. 7). The reason for focusing on Ontario is because this is the province in which I conducted the present study and because the informants within the study would likely be most familiar with learning and practicing this particular mandate.



In addition to the above definition, the OCSWSSW (2008) identified another key mandate of social work practice: “the development, promotion, implementation and evaluation of social policies aimed at improving social conditions and equality” (p. 7). Since climate change is a global problem that affects everyone and that disproportionately affects marginalized groups, since climate change clearly threatens the psychosocial and social functioning of individuals and society at large, and since the central solutions to dealing with climate change involve the need for policy changes by governments and businesses and a shifting social consciousness, as well as individual action, it is clear by the definition of the social work mandate by the OCSWSSW (2008) that environmental issues such as climate change fall under the purview of social work and, as such, one could reasonably expect a strong position on climate change initiatives from the social work discipline as a whole. As I will demonstrate, this is simply not the case.

### **The social work literature**

While several natural science disciplines have had a strong voice on the issue of climate change thus far, particularly in the technology sector, the same cannot be said of social workers on this same issue. When conducting a general search of the social work literature on climate change, results are negligible. Searching the terms “green social work,” “environmental social work,” “eco social work,” or even just “climate change” in the Social Work Abstracts and Social Work at Proquest search engines returned virtually nothing beyond a single hit for Dominelli’s (2012) book, entitled “Green Social Work,” as well as other resources that cited her book.

Searching “climate change and social work” and “environmental social work” in Google and Google Scholar returns several more results, including: books that discuss environmental

issues as related to social work by Bywaters, McLeod, and Napier (2009), Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2013), Harrison and Melville (2010), and Negi and Furman (2010); several published academic papers on this topic (Achstatter, 2014; Alston, 2015; Boetto, Moorhead, & Bell, 2014; Faruque & Ahmmed, 2013; Jones, 2008; Kemp & Palinkas, 2015; Mason, 2015; Peeters, 2012; Schmitz, Matyók, James, & Sloan, 2012; Sugirtha & Little Flower, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015; Zapf, 2010); one article on these issues that was published in an online social work magazine, *Social Work Today* (Dewane, 2011); several articles published online by social workers who want to draw attention to these issues (Clark, 2013; Ife, 2007; Moth & Morton, 2009; Skwiot, 2008; Whitaker, 2007); and other results that cited the above results and authors. This is already much more than when I originally conducted the same searches when I first started planning this thesis in 2014 (note how many sources are from 2014 on).

Major points of emphasis across all of these documents include: the disproportionate experience of environmental degradation by already marginalized groups; how social workers are well positioned to tackle these issues because of their specific skill set, including crisis preparedness and response, capacity building, and advocacy; and the need for an ideological shift in social work to include considerations for the environment. The main solutions proposed focused on educating social workers about these issues, exploring the connection between social work issues and the natural environment more explicitly in practice and research, and expanding the definitions of social work practice and education to include considerations for the environment. Overall, not a lot of results come up on this topic and, for the ones that do come up, the message is the same throughout: Social work is not as involved on environmental issues as it should be. Furthermore, none of the aforementioned documents are research

studies; rather, they are mostly research papers and articles. This absence on the part of social work raises serious questions about what role, if any, that social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues, such as climate change, and what barriers, if any, are likely to limit their action on these issues.

### **Summary**

In summary, it is evident that climate change is a massive global issue that is in need of immediate attention and solutions. It is also evident that the issue of climate change falls under the social work mandate, as it disproportionately affects marginalized populations and has significant negative impacts on the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities. Nonetheless, social workers have remained relatively silent on this issue thus far, which has identified two key questions that need to be addressed: What role, if any, can social workers play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change and what barriers, if any, are likely to limit their action on these issues?

## **Chapter III: Methodology**

The following section highlights the research questions addressed in this thesis, the research method that was used to address these questions, my social location within this research, as well as the research design utilized, including data sources, data recording procedures, and data analysis procedures. Ethical considerations and approaches to ensure study trustworthiness are also explored.

### **Research questions**

As identified in the empirical and theoretical review, this study sought to answer: 1) What role, if any, can social workers in Ontario play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change and 2) What barriers, if any, will social workers likely experience as they try to engage in action on environmental issues like climate change? These questions were designed to address the current lack of literature in the field of social work on environmental issues like climate change by highlighting whether social workers even think they have a role to play in dealing with these issues and, if they do think they play such a role, what may be limiting their action on those issues.

### **Research method**

This study was qualitative in nature. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach is appropriate to use when research is exploratory and when the researcher is seeking detailed understandings of a complex issue that does not have a universally accepted understanding. In this research, I sought to explore a new issue (the role of social workers in dealing with environmental issues) that involved multiple perspectives (of different kinds of social workers – clinicians, teachers, community social workers, etc.) about something that

does not have a universal understanding (their perceived role in dealing with issues like climate change and their perceived barriers to taking action on those issues). As such, a qualitative research methodology made the most sense for the particular interests of this study.

This research utilized the modified version of grounded theory described by Taylor and Bogdan (1998), which emphasizes the development of detailed understandings of phenomena from the perspective of the informants, rather than the development of a theory or theories about said phenomena. In conducting this study, I was interested in developing an understanding of social worker roles and barriers when engaging with environmental issues like climate change, based on the personal experiences of the informants. As such, the modified approach to grounded theory, as proposed by Taylor and Bogdan (1998), is the most appropriate for this research. Furthermore, since this is the first formal study that is known on this particular topic, the goal is to describe the phenomenon of interest, rather than develop a theory or theories about it.

### **Locating myself in the research**

I came to this research study as an environmentalist and social worker-in-training. I already believed that climate change was a part of the social work mandate and had already experienced a social work program that positioned the physical environment outside of the scope of social work. I assumed that this was the main reason that social workers do not get involved in this kind of work.

I also came to this research with the hope of producing results that would get social workers involved in this discussion and, ideally, move them to taking action on these issues. I

truly believe that social work is a discipline that is well equipped to tackle environmental issues like climate change.

In acknowledging these positions, I must also acknowledge the potential for these biases to have influenced my research, particularly my line of questioning and analysis of the data. In order to keep these biases in check, I developed an interview guide (Appendix A) to ensure some consistency from interview to interview. When changes were made, I made sure to triangulate them with my thesis advisers and colleagues to ensure the changes were rooted in the research. Questions were worded in a way to allow for the informants' personal experiences to come through, uninhibited by my personal perspectives. During the analysis phase, I engaged in the process of member checking to ensure that my interpretations of the interviewees' words were accurate. I summarized informants' answers throughout the interviews and again at the end of each interview. Furthermore, I sent out summaries of the interviews in my own words with some accompanying quotes to the informants who requested this on their consent form. All of the informants who engaged in this process approved the summaries as provided, which gave me some confidence that I had also accurately summarized the words of the other informants who did not engage in the member checking process. In addition, I maintained a reflexive journal and interview notes to form an audit trail and rationale for all of the decisions that were made throughout this study.

## **Research design**

### ***Sampling and recruitment***

The sampling strategies used were criterion, convenience, and snowball (Creswell (2007)). In this research, I sought a particular perspective (social workers) but limited access to

members who lived in close proximity to me in Southwestern Ontario due to the time constraints of the research. The informants in my research needed to meet the minimum criterion of self-identifying as social workers. After I interviewed the first three informants, I found it challenging to find others. At this point, I decided to implement a snowball sampling technique with the informants that I already interviewed for more leads and then contacted people of interest directly to obtain the final three informants.

Requests for participation were sent out to various schools of social work in Southwestern Ontario, who then distributed the request via email to all faculty members on staff. Further requests were made to the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW) and the Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW) but both required payments for this service that were not possible within this project. Requests for participation were also sent out to local schools boards in Southwestern Ontario but the process required for these requests could not be fulfilled within the timeframe of this project. Finally, requests were sent to local organizations in Southwestern Ontario that employ social workers, including hospitals and direct service organizations. Requests included the information letter (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix B). Some informants requested the interview questions (Appendix A) ahead of time, which was provided.

### ***Description of the sample***

Key informants included six individuals (two men and four women) who self-identified as social workers and who were living and working in Southwestern Ontario in a variety of capacities. Five informants were of European ancestry and one was of Aboriginal ancestry. One was a teacher at a university in a program other than social work but related to environmental

sustainability; four were teachers at universities in faculties of social work, including an academic researcher on environmental issues, an international social worker and clinician, an Indigenous educator and clinician, and another clinician and PhD candidate doing a dissertation related to the environment; and the last informant played a role directing community-based research at a local research agency in Southwestern Ontario. Overall, the spread of informants reflected a fairly heterogeneous group in terms of social work roles and perspectives, albeit with a heavy influence of European, Western trained social workers. As expected, only social workers who were already doing environmental work volunteered to participate in this research, which did not allow for the assessment of negative cases (i.e. social workers who do not believe that environmental issues are within their professional purview or social workers who had never previously considered their roles in dealing with these issues).

### ***Data sources***

Data was obtained for this research via open-ended, in-depth, semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2007). A semi-structured approach allowed for creativity of answers while still providing some consistency from interview-to-interview, thereby increasing the trustworthiness of this research. Interviews were 45 to 60 minutes in length and addressed the primary questions outlined in Appendix A.

The interview questions were developed to address the gaps that emerged during the empirical and theoretical review portion of this thesis and were designed to get at the central research questions outlined previously. The questions changed slightly from interview-to-interview as new information emerged and as each interview unfolded organically. For example, it became apparent early in the interview process that how social workers define



climate change was not nearly as important as how they defined the social work mandate in terms of how they understand their role in dealing with issues like climate change. As such, the latter question became a primary question to be asked of all informants, rather than a probe, and the former question was removed completely.

Interview questions were created in a reflexive manner in an attempt to limit leading responses based on my own subjective beliefs on this topic. This was done by identifying the initial assumptions with which I came to this research and then spending a lot of time dissecting the assumptions of each question and whether or not they truly got at the essence of the overall research purpose or if my own biases were at the heart of what I was asking. When I had come up with my initial questions, I submitted them to my advisers for review and approval. Some changes were suggested and incorporated to make up the final line of questioning found in Appendix A. This reflexive approach continued as needed for emerging questions and changes, as well as during data analysis and reporting.

#### ***Data recording procedures***

Interviews were conducted via telephone, as the preferred method of all of the informants, and were audio-recorded via a hand-held recording device. Notes were taken during the interviews as well to highlight the main points as they emerged and to flag ideas that required further discussion. Summary transcriptions were recorded following each of the interviews. All data recordings were downloaded to my personal computer and encrypted with a password for safe and confidential storage. Encrypted recordings were also backed up on an external hard drive, where they will remain for five years, after which point they will be destroyed.

### ***Data analysis procedures***

Data was analyzed using a grounded theory approach. As described by Corbin and Strauss (2015), data analysis using a grounded theory approach begins as soon as the first piece of data is obtained and continues for each individual piece of data as it is collected until theoretical saturation is achieved. Each individual case is compared to each new case as they become available, a process known as constant comparison, during which developed themes and sub themes are compared across cases to develop the overall thematic categories that are common among the cases. This is the approach that was used in this study. Each summary was typed and open-coded after each individual interview was completed. Open-codes were then analyzed and re-coded into higher-level thematic abstractions that brought similar sub themes together under a unifying theme, which were then compared across individual cases to develop the global themes, organizing themes, and sub themes of all of the interviews. Concepts that were mentioned at least twice were included in the thematic analysis, unless the case could clearly be made for including a concept that was only mentioned once. This was only the case for one organizing theme. The full thematic analysis can be found in the results section below.

### **Ethical considerations**

This research project was approved by the Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board (#4597) on October 8<sup>th</sup>, 2015, for the period up until April 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2016. The following subsections present the particular ethical considerations that were pertinent to this research.

#### ***Informed Consent***

All informants were provided with a consent form (Appendix B) and information letter (Appendix C) via email prior to their participation in the research. These documents outlined

what their participation would entail and what risks and benefits were possible due to their participation. Informants were also provided with the contact information for my thesis advisers, the Research Ethics Board, and myself. Informants were invited to ask me any questions they had prior to their participation. Five of six informants returned their signed consent forms via email. One informant did not have access to a functional scanner and so requested to give verbal consent, which was allowed.

### ***Confidentiality***

Confidentiality was assured to informants in writing (Appendix B). To ensure confidentiality, no informants were identified in this research, except in general ways (i.e. “One informant said...” “She added that...” etc.). All identifying information was removed from the interview summaries. All data recordings (consent forms, transcripts, and audio recordings) were digitized and password encrypted on my personal computer, as well as on an external hard drive. Informants gave their permission to be anonymously quoted, which all of the informants agreed to.

### ***Potential risks to informants***

Informants were educated on the potential risks of their participation in this study (Appendix B), including possible discomfort due to discussing a significant global issue like climate change and the possibility of being identifiable on the basis of their responses. Informants were provided with contact supports in case of significant discomfort. Informants were also assured that every reasonable effort would be made to ensure the confidentiality of their responses, as described above. Quotations were carefully selected to be as limiting of

identifiable indicators as possible. Top quotations were also sent out to informants that requested member checking on their consent form and approval was received in all cases.

### ***Potential benefits of the research***

Informants were educated on the potential benefits to their participation in this research (Appendix B), namely contributing to a limited body of research that may lead to meaningful changes in the profession of social work and, potentially, the world over, in terms of encouraging more social work action on environmental issues like climate change.

### **Study trustworthiness**

Several methods were followed to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, which are outlined as follows.

#### ***Triangulation***

Due to the potential for my personal biases on this subject matter to affect my thesis, I engaged in a consistent process of triangulation throughout all stages of the research process, including developing the research questions, designing the research, analyzing the data, and writing up the final report. Sources of triangulation included my thesis advisers, my colleagues, the empirical and theoretical review, the data collected, other available literature, and my reflexive journals and interview notes. This process helped me to ensure that my research was grounded in the literature and data collected.

#### ***Member checking***

Another way that I ensured that my biases were kept in check throughout this research process was by engaging in member checking with all of the informants during each interview, as well as following each interview with the informants who selected this option on their

consent form (Appendix B). During the interviews, I made sure to summarize each informant's answers back to them. At the end of each interview, I provided informants with an overall verbal summary of the interview to ensure that I understood what they were saying. In addition, four of the six informants opted to review the written summary of their responses and top selected quotations prior to being incorporated into the findings of this research.

### ***Audit trail***

An audit trail of the research process was maintained as another method of increasing the trustworthiness of this research. Taking notes during each interview and documenting the research process in my journal accomplished this task effectively. I also took pictures of my analytic process, which utilized colour-coded post-it notes for distinct thematic categories as they emerged in the research.

### **Summary**

This chapter has outlined, in detail, the specific research methodology that was at the heart of this research process, including the research questions that emerged out of the empirical and theoretical review and how those questions were addressed using a qualitative research method that was informed by the theoretical perspectives of social constructivism, pragmatism, and grounded theory. It then described how interviews were conducted via telephone with six self-identified social workers (two men, four women) from Southwestern Ontario, with a heavy influence of Western social work perspectives, yet a fairly heterogeneous mix of social work roles. Interviews were summarized with main quotes, which were then analyzed using a grounded theory approach and drawn up into global themes, organizing themes, and sub themes. This section concluded with a consideration of the ethical issues and

approaches for maintaining study trustworthiness. At this point, readers should be well prepared to review the findings of this research, which are outlined in detail in the following section.

## Chapter IV: Results

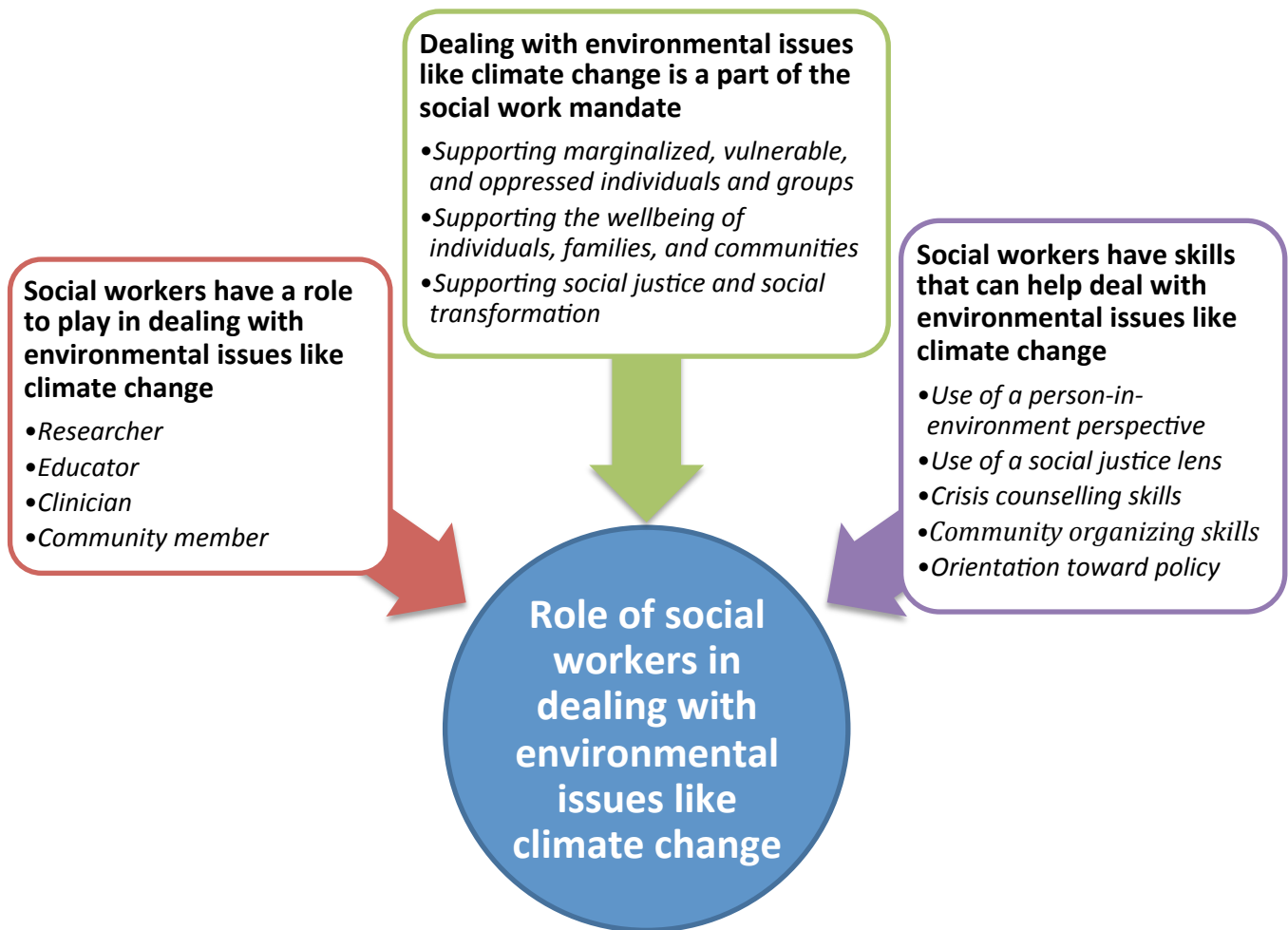
Two global themes, five organizing themes, and 21 sub themes were developed out of this study (Table 1). This chapter presents these findings in detail and provides the foundation for understanding what role social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change and what barriers could be limiting their action on these issues.

Table 1. *Summary of study themes.*

Global themes	Organizing themes	Sub themes
Role of social workers in dealing with environmental issues like climate change	Social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change	<i>Researcher</i>
		<i>Educator</i>
		<i>Clinician</i>
		<i>Community member</i>
	Dealing with environmental issues like climate change is a part of the social work mandate	<i>Supporting marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed individuals and groups</i>
		<i>Supporting the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities</i>
		<i>Supporting social justice and social transformation</i>
	Social workers have skills that can help deal with environmental issues like climate change	<i>Use of a person-in-environment perspective</i>
		<i>Use of a social justice lens</i>
		<i>Crisis counselling skills</i>
		<i>Community organizing skills</i>
		<i>Orientation toward policy</i>
	Factors contributing to social work (in)action on environmental issues like climate change	Barriers exist that limit social work action on environmental issues like climate change
<i>Western social work cultural mindset</i>		
<i>Lack of professional opportunities to take action</i>		
<i>Lack of apparent need to act in day-to-day work</i>		
<i>Fear of appropriation of ideas</i>		
Factors exist that help social workers take action on environmental issues like climate change		<i>Exposure to the issues</i>
		<i>Social work training</i>
		<i>Indigenous teachings</i>
		<i>A sense of responsibility</i>

## Global theme #1: Role of social workers in dealing with environmental issues like climate change

Informants discussed that not only do social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, they have a role that they must play, since taking action on these issues is a part of the social work mandate and since social workers bring a skill set to the table that can help to mitigate these issues. These three organizing themes are broken down into further sub themes below and are represented by *Figure 1*.



*Figure 1.* Thematic network #1: Role of social workers in dealing with environmental issues like climate change.



## **1. Social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change**

The first major theme to come out of the interviews was that social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, which all of the informants agreed with. Informants identified four key roles that they currently play, as outlined below.

### ***a) Researcher***

All of the informants identified with fulfilling this role. In this role, informants discussed their work conducting research and writing about environmental issues like climate change. As one informant put it, they are making “academic contributions to the field of eco social work.” Identifying the particular research focuses of the informants is not possible, as it would likely identify who they are, since there are not very many people who do this work. Generally speaking, research areas included our relationship with energy and resources, consumerism, addictions, poverty, economic justice, climate change, water, Indigenous traditions, and ecological ethics.

### ***b) Educator***

In this role, informants discussed their work bringing environmental issues like climate change into their classroom discussions with social workers-in-training. As one Indigenous informant described: “I bring [climate change] back into the classroom in terms of talking about our space and Creation and I think that’s an important starting point.” She elaborated to say that: “it’s not about the climate per se, it’s addressing our relationships and our connection to each other, as well as with the environment,” adding that: “We talk about how we can’t heal as individuals, we can’t be whole, we can’t restore balance as individuals and communities until our environment is healthy...on that level we don’t talk about climate change, we talk about

connection.” This informant emphasized that they do not discuss climate change directly; rather, as an Indigenous educator, they discuss how the environment is built into their overall worldview and, as such, it cannot be separated from the discussion. It was highlighted that framing the conversation around “connection,” rather than climate, is an important starting point for shifting the cultural ideologies of Western social workers, who, as she argued, are currently disconnected from the environment.

As another informant put it, they:

...spend some time clarifying through anthropological literature, through Indigenous perspectives, that the sociality that we see within humanity is something that is actually rooted in ecosystems and its climate systems, and that climate change is actually a social response to behaviours that are traditionally... anti-social.

In this sense, sociality and the environment are taught as irremovably connected to each other.

Another informant stated that:

We don’t talk as much about climate change as we do about what is social work's kind of role in environment and environmentalism... we are stewards of the profession and we have to make it so that the people we are working with have a healthy place to live.

Overall, some of the main topics that informants discussed bringing into their classrooms, regarding environmental issues and social work, included: space and place; Indigenous ways of knowing, being, seeing, and doing; sociality as rooted in environments; the evolution of the species; crisis intervention; environmental justice; and trauma counselling.

### ***c) Clinician***

In this role, the informants discussed how they attempt to bring environmental perspectives into their clinical practices. The Indigenous clinician discussed how connecting with the environment is central to Indigenous clinical practice, saying that: “People need to be reconnected to their space and Creation and that’s how I see a big part of our role.” In this

sense, discussing and engaging with the environment is irremovable from her clinical practice because it is an essential part of Indigenous traditions. As some of the clinicians highlighted, there are some challenges with bringing these concepts into their practices, as I discuss in the barriers section below.

***d) Community member***

A number of informants discussed fulfilling this role as part of their action on environmental issues. Although the informants were clear in pointing out that they do not do this work as paid social workers, per se, they highlighted how, for them, it is impossible to separate their professional and private selves. As one informant said: “it is hard for Indigenous people to separate their role within the family, communities, and environments.” As another informant put it: “I think in order to decide to enter the field of social work means having to make a commitment to not having a nine to five job.” In other words, they do not just consider their paid social work positions to be social work. It extends to every aspect of their lives, including their role as community members.

One informant discussed his role in a community-based environmental activism group, in terms of “community organizing,” “building strategies,” and “building relationships and coalitions.” It was highlighted that, while his paid profession as a social worker influenced this work, his community independently leads these initiatives. As such, he does not take on this role as a paid social worker; rather, he does so as a volunteer within his community.

Two informants also talked about the personal decisions that they make to take action on environmental issues, such as “trying to learn more [about the issues],” “using products with a low economic footprint,” commuting without a car, and “bringing the conversation to the

table in volunteer positions.” As they discussed, they are social workers at all times, even when making personal decisions at home.

One informant discussed their role as a parent in her community, in terms of raising the next generation with core values around respecting the Earth. She said that she talks to her small child about these issues and about “taking care of Mother Earth,” adding that “we all share this role, whatever we call ourselves,” highlighting again that what is considered social work is not always just paid social work positions.

## **2. Dealing with environmental issues like climate change is a part of the social work mandate**

The second main theme to come out of this research study was that taking action on environmental issues like climate change is a part of the social work mandate, which all of the informants agreed with. One of the informants noted: “yes, it should, it should, but I don’t think we think enough about that as social workers,” adding that: “social workers should really be at the front lines of, um, advocacy for/ against climate change.” This sentiment was echoed by another informant who said: “social workers should be on the front line actually trying to help people adapt and respond in relation to the social systems and what they need,” adding that: “To be aware of these issues, to put the ecosystem model of social work within this broader frame of reference is absolutely essential. Without it, we are missing a central piece of the puzzle.” One informant exclaimed enthusiastically: “Oh YEAH! (*laughs*) Of COURSE it should be,” adding that she is “always very surprised to learn that environmental issues like climate change had not entered into the consciousness of social work peers.” Another informant added, “We can no longer ignore the environmental aspects within the realm of what social work is” and, as the final informant put it: “If we don’t have a planet to live on or if we don’t

have clean air to breathe, you know, guess what, anxiety really isn't... probably shouldn't be the only issue that we talk about."

Informants defined their perceived mandate as social workers into three key areas that they felt applied to environmental issues such as climate change, as outlined below.

***a) Supporting marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed individuals and groups***

Several informants reported this as part of their mandate as social workers. As one informant said: "Climate change is, to a large extent, distributed and created by the same social and economic forces that create poverty and marginalization in the first place – capitalism, racism, et cetera." As he described it, it is a social work issue because "people feeling the impacts are in the marginalized, vulnerable, impoverished communities that social workers say they want to deal with," adding that: "climate change affects basic human needs, let alone the flourishing that social work is trying to get at." As another informant highlighted, social workers have made a "commitment to supporting those most marginalized, making sure their voices are heard and that decisions are being made so that their needs are taken care of."

As an example, one informant noted: "vulnerable populations will be impacted first. Indigenous communities are being impacted already, refugees as well." She added that: "food prices are going up because climate change affects crops...[which then] impacts the families we work with." As another example, one informant said: "we are aware locally of some of the issues that are facing our elderly and homeless populations DIRECTLY as a result of climate change," adding that the water shortage currently happening in Bangladesh and the Syrian refugee crisis could also be argued to be a result of climate change. She added: "We can expect a lot more of that in the future." In this sense, climate change is a part of the social work

mandate because it disproportionately impacts the marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed populations that social workers are committed to supporting.

***b) Supporting the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities***

A few informants reported this, in some form, as part of their mandate as social workers. As one informant defined it, her mandate is “Helping individuals, families, and communities to find wholeness and healing through Indigenous ways... Indigenous ways of knowing, seeing, being, and doing... to help people achieve balance, harmony, and health, whether they are Indigenous or not.” She added that: “we can’t talk about the health of our families, individuals, and communities until the environment is healthy.” Another informant said that: “the mandate is to shuffle people through a system that is unjust and to help them cope.”

The ideas of “healing,” “coping,” “balance,” “health,” and “harmony” are discussed here as central to wellbeing. As one informant discussed: “we are seeing more and more evidence of how much people are suffering,” adding that: “There is no life without our planet so, you know, if we really are committed to peoples’ wellbeing, we have to be committed to their survival. We can’t have one without the other.” In this sense, dealing with the issues of climate change is a part of the social work mandate because it negatively impacts the overall health and wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities.

***c) Supporting social justice and social transformation***

A couple informants reported this as part of their mandate as social workers. As one informant defined it, their mandate is “to work alongside others towards seeking social and environmental justice.” As another informant put it: “The official mandate is that it should be

about transforming our systems and communities to make ones that are more just.” In other words, the mandate of social workers is to transform communities by seeking social and environmental justice. As one informant pointed out, this is not necessarily what social work is; rather, just what it “should be,” according to the “official mandate” of the profession.

### **3. Social workers have skills that can help deal with environmental issues like climate change**

The third major theme to come out of this research was that social workers have a unique skill set that is well equipped to deal with environmental issues like climate change, which the majority of the informants discussed, highlighting five main skills that they could contribute to dealing with these issues, as outlined below.

#### ***a) Use of a person-in-environment perspective***

Most of the informants that talked about social work skills in dealing with climate change discussed how they operate from a person-in-environment perspective. As one informant described: “it is a huge challenge to understand all of the intricacies [of climate change] and social work is well placed to understand those intricacies,” adding that social workers operate from a “person-in-environment perspective from the individual to the policy level.” As another informant put it, the person-in-environment perspective allows an “understanding of the individuals within broader social processes.” She added that: “we need to extend this to include ecological ones, but we’ve got that person-in-environment kind of thinking.”

#### ***b) Use of a social justice lens***

Many of the informants that talked about social work skills discussed how they operate from a social justice perspective. As one informant put it, social workers “look at the world

through a social justice lens with a particular view toward inequalities, power, and the distribution of wealth, which is what we need to see climate change within the social and political context.” According to another informant, it is with such a lens that social workers “address oppression,” “contribute to positive social change,” and “contribute to people’s thinking differently.”

***c) Crisis counselling skills***

A few informants discussed counselling as a pertinent skill that they can contribute to tackling environmental issues like climate change. As one informant described, social workers are “helpers that are naturally oriented toward finding solutions,” that “counsel people through crisis” while utilizing an “asset-based lens.” As she put it: “social workers have a unique skill set to be able to manage and support people through these kinds of crises and nobody is talking about it.”

Another informant described how their knowledge base of different clinical therapy models could be well served in the future, as we try to figure out how to integrate ideas around the environment into clinical practice. As she put it: “I know many of the evidence-based approaches... I think in another phase of my contribution will be how we can extend these to incorporate environmental perspectives.”

***d) Community organizing skills***

A couple of the informants that discussed social work skills in dealing with climate change talked about how they are good community organizers. They discussed how social workers are good at “talking and connecting with people;” “hearing their experiences and stories of how things were and are now in relation to climate change;” “listening for history and



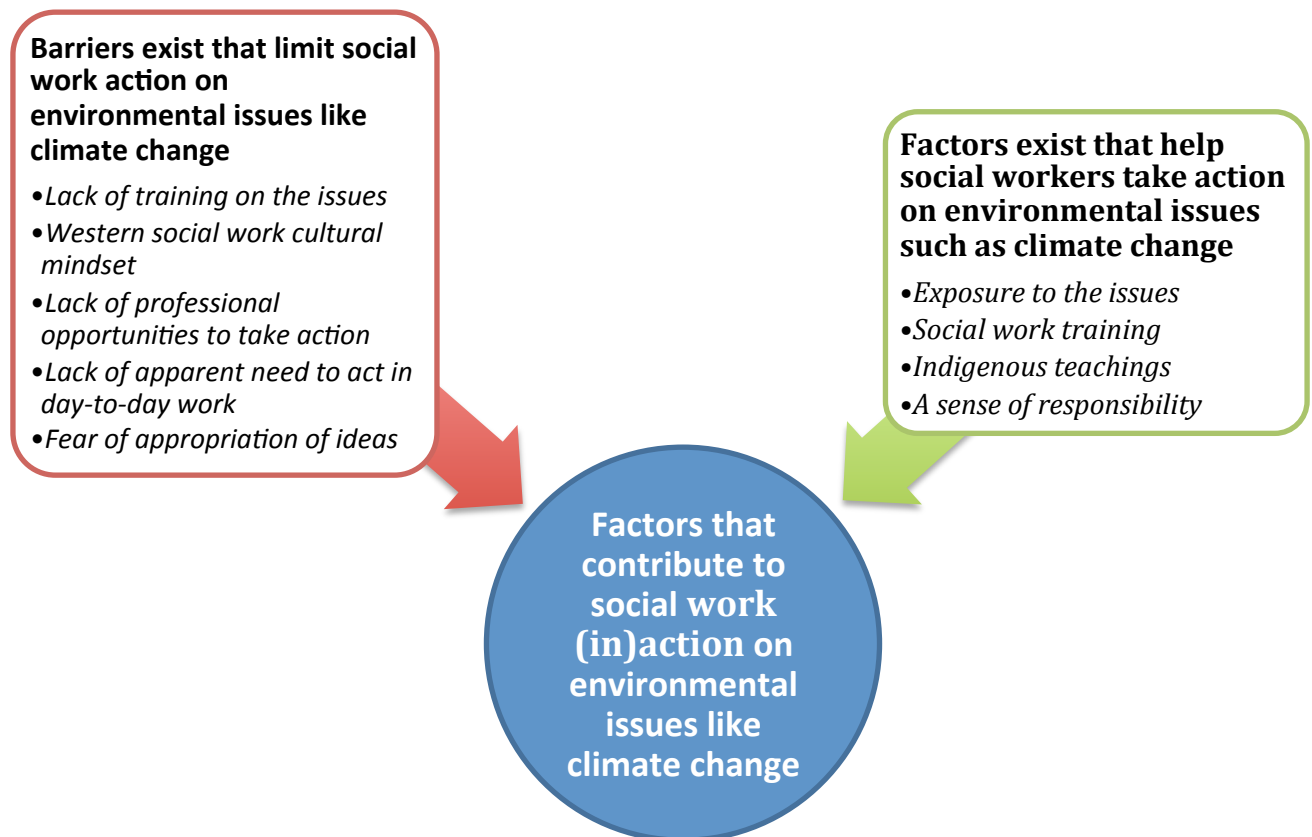
opportunities for change;” “assessing what the situation is through observation with how people interact with their environments;” “getting people organized and helping people navigate the process,” in terms of interacting with governance structures, campaigns, and language; and “building relationships.” As one informant said: “Social workers are not always the best community organizers around but we do have some theoretical and practical skills to contribute to that process, to not repeat mistakes, and to break through assumptions that sometimes reinforce marginalization.” He added: “this is just part of our mentality and training, particularly in the [community, policy, planning, and organization] stream in social work.” In this sense, social workers bring the particular perspectives discussed earlier (social justice and person-in-environment) to community organizing initiatives, which helps to ensure a smoother and more inclusive organizational effort.

***e) Orientation toward policy***

A couple of the informants that discussed social work skills in dealing with environmental issues like climate change discussed how they have an orientation towards policy, in terms of “its impacts and how to maneuver [it].” As they described it, social workers are able to: “parse policy elements and pin-point to where power is and critically analyze it within a person-in-environment frame;” “translate policy quickly into what it means for the community in plain language,” in terms of what it is and why they should care; “understand where [policy] comes from and how it is made, which is powerful when confronting institutions and influencing governments, as well as stimulating action on the ground;” “identify gaps;” “work within policy,” in terms of how to challenge policy directly; and, sometimes, “advocate for policy change.”

**Global theme #2: Factors that contribute to social work (in)action on environmental issues like climate change**

Informants discussed how there are a number of factors that hinder and help their ability to take action on environmental issues like climate change as social workers. These two organizing themes are broken down into further sub themes below and are represented by *Figure 2*.



*Figure 2*. Thematic network #2: Factors that contribute to social work (in)action on environmental issues like climate change.

## **1. Barriers exist that limit social work action on environmental issues like climate change**

The fourth main theme that was developed from the interviews was that there are several barriers that exist that serve to limit social work action on environmental issues like climate change. Informants noted five key barriers to action, outlined below.

### ***a) Lack of training on the issues***

All of the informants discussed a lack of training about environmental issues like climate change as a barrier to their taking action on these issues. As one informant noted: “social work had not taught me anything about that,” adding that social workers are educated “as if [the environment] doesn’t matter.” As he put it:

In standard social work, ecosystems are just seen as individuals connected with family, connected with community, connected with institutions, and there are all these feedback loops and what not, but the fact that all of that occurs in... actual ecological climate systems is totally blank... so we have generations of social workers, right up to the present moment, who are being educated as if the environment and climate is not the context in which we do our social work.

Another informant noted: “social workers might not know enough about it to see how it integrates into their work” because “it is not a priority in social work education.” She added that human development and behaviour courses focus so much on individual development throughout the life course and that it often does not take an ecological perspective to development, adding that: “what would make that course so relevant for social work would be the inclusion of the environment and how it can affect development.”

Two informants discussed the challenges they experience when trying to expose social workers-in-training to these issues. As one informant said: “sometimes when I bring this up [to my third year students], I can see the perplexed look on their faces when I am talking about something beyond the human,” which really highlights how little social work students are

exposed to these issues in their courses. As he noted, this is largely because there is a major push in the profession for social workers to be graduating with “particular skills” and how the students have never been exposed to that information before so, by that point, it may “seem kind of moot.” As another informant put it, the biggest challenge that they face in trying to expose social work students to these issues is “mainly carving out space in a very tight curriculum,” adding that, while she feels as though she can bring these issues in quite freely, she does not feel like she has “permission to overhaul a syllabus.”

***b) Western social work cultural mindset***

All of the informants talked about the Western social work profession’s cultural mindset as a barrier to them taking action on climate change. They discussed social work as being focused heavily on the individual operating within the social environment and separate from the physical environment. As one informant described it:

There is a cultural frame of reference in the Western academic system that has said we can do whatever we want whenever we want and not really consider nature as part of the problem... and social work was born out of the industrial revolution but out of this cultural context with this particular worldview that is influenced by ideas formed prior to the enlightenment that doesn’t consider the environment.

Another informant questioned: “Because the focus of social work is on people, I wonder if some of it is that... clinical focus that does not necessarily think in terms of systems?” This was echoed by another informant who discussed how “social work has aimed for legitimacy for several decades” and that the profession “started to turn to Psychology to inform and develop it” and, as a result, “social diagnosis then became the core of social work.” In this sense, social work is heavily focused on casework and diagnosis. One informant added that: “you are lucky if you can even find a therapist who can even talk about your interpersonal relationships,” adding

that: “all the systems, especially in the hospital and organizations, are focused on the individual and INTRA-experiences,” such as emotional experiences, self-talk, activities, behaviours, etc., rather than the “INTER-experiences,” between individuals and their various environments.

As one informant described it: “I think we think of the person-in-environment as the person in the social environment, but we really need to think of it as the person in the environment generally, all different types of environments.”

As another informant described:

Social work has taken the view of the environment as the other... our environment is usually referred to as schools, churches, organizations, very rarely is it thought of as the environment itself... We have lost that connection that the environment is just as much to play on our health.

She added: “mainstream social work doesn’t view the environment as part of their role, it is seen as separate from us and as belonging to other disciplines.” As another informant noted: “we’ve managed to keep nature out of the mix to some extent.”

### ***c) Lack of professional opportunities to take action***

Most informants identified a lack of professional opportunities as a significant barrier to them being able to take action on environmental issues such as climate change. All of the informants received training in social work and four of them had to leverage their social work skills in unique ways in order to do the environmental work that they do. One informant noted: “there aren’t a lot of professional opportunities for social workers to take action on climate change... not at the macro level and least of all at the micro level.” As another informant put it: “it is exterior to the core of the profession in some ways.”

One informant described how she is the only social worker on staff at her place of employment, where she gets to support community-based research projects around

environmental issues like climate change, and that she is not paid as a social worker to do so, adding: “even to call myself a social worker, that isn’t really a central part of my identity,” even though she was trained as a social worker and uses her social work training and skills in that role. As another informant said: “no agencies or institutions are doing this kind of work...because people can’t see how it fits in.”

***d) Lack of apparent need to act in day-to-day work***

Most of the informants discussed a lack of an apparent need to incorporate environmental perspectives into their day-to-day work as social workers. As one informant put it: “we do not see those issues directly here,” adding: “it doesn’t relate to the day-to-day work or the presenting problems of social work clients... never have I had a moment in my work where I thought ‘I have to take climate action NOW,’” since people come in with immediate, presenting issues that need to be dealt with. As an example of this issue, one informant noted:

I find it hard to speak up about it to someone who is, you know, living in abject poverty, because what are they going to do? It isn’t a priority for them, even though climate change is making things more difficult for them.

She added that: “it is hard to convince people that it is important when people are experiencing day-to-day struggles with things like extreme poverty.” As another informant put it: “it’s not a part of what our clients are talking about.” She added: “...although, you know, I don’t know if I can say that fairly because I don’t ask enough of it/ about it to really know how far away they are from it,” highlighting the possibility that social workers do not see the apparent need to bring these ideas into their day-to-day work because they do not ask about these things and, as such, they never present as an issue. As other informants discussed, it really is more that they

“lack the tools,” “language,” and “models” to do this work, namely because of the barriers around training.

It is important to note that all of the informants agreed that environmental issues should be incorporated into the day-to-day work of social workers. Many of them are just unsure what this should or could look like. As one informant said: “I am having a hard time thinking about how clinical social work would find work in that context, but I think that conversation definitely needs to happen but I haven’t seen that so much.” As one of the clinical social workers noted: “I am trying to get better as a therapist at integrating these issues better with clients but I REALLY have a hard time doing this...and I’m an experienced therapist and I can incorporate ideas quite easily.” She added: “I am seasoned enough for that and I have done that with clients but it is not nearly as often as I think it could be.”

***e) Fear of appropriation of ideas***

The one Indigenous informant discussed the fear of appropriation of Indigenous ideas as a limitation to their taking action on environmental issues like climate change. This was included as a main theme, despite only being mentioned by one informant, because there was only one Indigenous social worker in the sample and because their fear of the appropriation of Indigenous worldviews and knowledges was mentioned at several different points throughout the interview, suggesting that this was a significant issue that needed to be highlighted in its own right. This is especially worth considering because of the recommendations made by the IPCC, which emphasized that we need to work with Indigenous peoples in order to solve the climate crisis, as discussed in the empirical and theoretical review section above.

This informant highlighted that: “for Indigenous writers, there is a fear of appropriation of our ideas and a loss of the spirit of our knowledges when writing on topics like this...we are taught to share but also to protect our knowledges.” They added that Western social work needs to look at Indigenous values and learn from them in terms of how they view the world and interact with “Mother Earth,” in a way “where it does not just get repackaged, like it has in the past” As she put it:

For Indigenous people, it isn't just an environmental concern, it is a part of our spirit and that cannot be separated... when looking at mainstream theories, often the spirit is the first to get disconnected, and I think that's where we've lost our ways.

It was very important to the informant that it was understood that Indigenous knowledges and traditions are certainly a part of the solution, yet there is a great fear amongst Indigenous writers that their ideas will be appropriated and repackaged in a way that does not honour the spirit of that knowledge, by not acknowledging where the information came from, and by picking bits and pieces of it and leaving out the essential elements that are tied to the Indigenous worldview. This may be a major reason why we have not seen much in the literature from Indigenous writers about environmental issues like climate change, despite the fact that their worldview incorporates this perspective much more fluidly than Western social work practice.

## **2. Factors exist that help social workers take action on environmental issues such as climate change**

The fifth and final theme to come out of this research was that there are factors that exist that help social workers to take action on environmental issues like climate change.

Informants identified four key helping factors, as outlined below.



**a) Exposure to the issues**

Most informants discussed being exposed to environmental issues like climate change as a major helping factor in getting them involved with these issues. All of the informants discussed having no exposure to these issues in their social work training programs. As one informant said:

I had ZERO exposure in my MSW or PhD classes, except another student who was looking at water issues in Africa, but that's IT... if she hadn't been in my class, maybe I wouldn't have, you know... maybe I would have stepped into the old systems.

She added: "None of the curriculum presented from the professors addressed these issues." As another informant said: "none of this is part of the conversation and is not part of the training as social workers."

As such, informants discussed how they were all exposed to the issues outside of their social work training. As one informant noted: "I had no intention of looking at this topic," referring to her PhD dissertation on environmental issues in social work. She was given some readings to do in her general topic area and one of the pieces happened to be about an environmental issue, and that is how she accidentally got exposed to these issues.

Another informant talked about how she was not exposed to these issues until she took her Masters degree in another field related to health and when she began doing work in international communities, saying that: "Seeing poverty and seeing how people are living and how environment plays a role in their lives, this is where I really see climate change and the environment playing out." She added that: "disasters have a pretty clear connection to climate change...you see climate change directly impacting people's lives." As she put it: "That is a big

criticism of our education and of the field that we don't pay attention to these things and that I had to get it from another discipline.”

Another informant discussed how he was not exposed to these issues until he started to work with Indigenous communities after completing his MSW training. As he described, “being able to see this relationship of how they conceived of the health of themselves and the health of their community in relation to the health of their land” was an inspiration to action. It was highlighted that he had graduated with an MSW at a time when the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples was coming together and, at the same time, the United Nations had released a report on the economic disparities that were prevalent between Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities in Canada, causing “a need at that point to become better acquainted with these issues.”

Another informant discussed not getting involved in these issues until taking on paid and volunteer positions after obtaining his MSW. As this informant noted: “I kinda fell into this [environmental] thing out of a more general interest in being involved in the community.”

Informants added that they continue to get exposed to environmental issues like climate change through their own self-education. As one informant said, what helps her to take action on these issues is “continuing to self-educate and making connections in different areas between different issues,” like how different news stories are connected to things like climate change.

Some informants also discussed their upbringing as crucial in their exposure to these kinds of issues, allowing them to take action later in life. One informant discussed being raised by parents who were “hippies” that cared about the Earth and about nature and how they

made a big effort to get out into nature while she was growing up. She added that: “they instilled in me a respect for the environment.” As another informant discussed, he is of Mohawk ancestry, which instilled a desire in him to understand this part of his heritage and these relations between people and the Earth.

### ***b) Social work training***

A few informants discussed their social work training as an important helping factor in their taking action on environmental issues like climate change. As one informant noted, social work training provided a skill set that was beneficial for taking social action, such as: “reflexivity and the use of self, which helps you start making those connections when these issues are on your radar;” “advocacy... social work does well in teaching budding social workers that taking action is an ethical prerogative...that is a skill that has served me really well;” and “self-care,” as “climate activists can get really burnt out.” As another informant described: “[My BSW] changed my whole view of how social change can happen. It got me into organizing and understanding how politics and capitalism and all that work.”

### ***c) Indigenous teachings***

A couple of the informants discussed Indigenous teachings as important helping factors in their taking action on environmental issues such as climate change. As one informant noted: “Our Indigenous teachings and knowledges inadvertently place you as part and within Creation, so it’s hard to separate yourself from Creation,” adding that: “writing about this and wholism, we inadvertently write about the environment, whether [or not] we label it as such.” She corrected herself to say: “Not really inadvertently, it is just naturally a part of our worldview of wholism.” Another informant discussed that being exposed to the Indigenous teachings on

peoples' relationship to the natural world and the Indigenous holistic frame of reference began an awakening where he: "...started to see these blocks and fragmented perspectives in the Western [social work] traditions, which opened up a possible frame of reference to bring this material in and work on it."

***d) A sense of responsibility***

A few informants discussed how they have a sense of responsibility in this world that encourages them to take action on environmental issues like climate change. Interestingly, these were the same informants who discussed being exposed to Indigenous teachings as essential to their action on these issues. As the one informant discussed, as a parent and community member, she has a sense of responsibility to act because she wants "a sustainable life and Earth for our children," and that: "it's not just about us... we need to look at the present and the future." As another informant put it:

When you find yourself in certain positions and you find yourself moved by the world around you, you have a responsibility to act from those spaces, despite if it is difficult to find particular points of action. You have a responsibility to actually open up spaces... a responsibility as part of Creation, as a human being.

## **Chapter V: Discussion**

This research project sought to gain an understanding about why there is such a gap presently in the social work literature on environmental issues like climate change and to determine what may help social workers take more action on these issues. This is a topic that is especially worth considering when looking at how the mandate for the profession has been defined, as well as how the solutions to this problem are not that of the technological field; rather, they are of individual action, community education, and political pressure, all of which are the purview of the field of social work. By focusing on the lived experiences of social workers, the current study sought to answer what role, if any, they can play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change and what barriers, if any, that are likely to limit their action on these issues. The current chapter begins with a summary of the main findings and then discusses them in terms of the key inferences and implications to be drawn from said findings. The study's strengths, limitations, and conclusions are also explored.

### **Summary of study findings**

The first main theme that developed from this research is that social workers do have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change. The four key roles that social workers currently play are as researchers, educators, clinicians, and community members. On the other hand, several informants highlighted that they had to leverage their social work skills creatively in order to do this work and that they are not necessarily paid as social workers to do it.

The second theme that developed was that taking action on environmental issues like climate change is a part of the social work mandate. The mandate of social workers was defined

as three main commitments: to support marginalized, vulnerable, and oppressed populations; to support the wellbeing of individuals, families, and communities; and to promote social change and transformation. The informants discussed how by making these commitments, they indirectly make a commitment to taking action on environmental issues like climate change because these issues directly impact the wellbeing of marginalized people and communities. As such, social workers are required to take action in order to promote change on these issues.

The third theme that came out of this study was that social workers have a unique skill set that can help deal with environmental issues like climate change. Skills highlighted included the use of a person-in-environment perspective, the use of a social justice lens, crisis counselling skills, community organizing skills, and an orientation toward policy. Skills were discussed in terms of what social workers can offer to mitigate environmental issues like climate change that are not necessarily being utilized currently, largely due to the barriers outlined below.

The fourth major theme of this research study was that there are significant barriers that limit social work action on environmental issues like climate change, including a lack of training on the issues, the particular cultural mindset of Western social work, a lack of professional opportunities to take action on these issues, a lack of an apparent need to take action on these issues in the day-to-day work of social workers, and a fear of appropriation of the ideas of Indigenous peoples.

The fifth main theme that developed out of the research was that there are some factors that help social workers to take action on environmental issues like climate change,

despite the aforementioned barriers, including exposure to the issues, social work training, exposure to Indigenous teachings, and a sense of responsibility.

### **Key inferences from the findings**

There were two main inferences that were drawn from the results of this research. These inferences are discussed in relation to the empirical and theoretical review outlined at the beginning of this paper, other literature in the field that was found to add to these findings, and my own experience, as appropriate.

***Social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change because doing so is a part of the social work mandate and because they have the skills to do so***

The first main take away from this research is that social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change because it is a part of the social work mandate and because social workers have the skills to help deal with these kinds of issues. In terms of social workers having a role to play, this is consistent with the key word search that I conducted at the beginning of this research project, which revealed that the majority of social workers who are discussing these issues believe that social work should have a stronger presence in an area that is increasingly dependent on social work solutions. As Ife (2007) said:

...new agendas have emerged, which now dominate the headlines and the attention of governments. The most significant of these are, of course, terrorism and global warming. At first sight these may not seem to be of particular concern for social work, but I want to suggest that both terrorism and global warming raise critical issues that should be of great concern to social workers, and that demand a strong social work response in the international arena, while at the same time maintaining our primary commitment to social justice. If we ignore them, we will lose our relevance (Para. 4).

Sugirtha and Little Flower (2015) echoed these sentiments in their paper, which stated: "This paper recognizes the emergence of new international agendas for social work profession and

argues that social work has a role to play in challenging the social, political and economic structures and processes that cause climate change” (p. 102). According to Moth and Morton (2009): “The contribution of social workers and service users to mitigation [of climate change] such as involvement in the wider environmental social movements against climate change and to force international action will be invaluable” (Para. 11). This concept has already been acknowledged by clinical psychologists and community psychologists, who are actively seeking change, and who are adding their voices to the broader discourse on these issues (Doherty & Clayton, 2011; Fritze, Blashki, & Burke, 2008; Gifford, 2008; Godschalk, 2011; Reimer & Reich, 2011; Reser & Swim, 2011). Now, it is time for social workers to get involved in the discussion and, more importantly, the action.

In terms of the social work mandate, according to the findings of this research, not only do social workers have a role that they *can* play; they have a role that they *must* play if they are to fulfill their duties as social workers. In making a commitment to social justice, the informants argued, social workers also, implicitly, make a commitment to environmental justice, as environmental crises disproportionately affect marginalized and vulnerable populations in a way that negatively affects their overall wellbeing as individuals, which impacts the wellbeing of the communities overall, and vice versa, thereby further oppressing said individuals and communities. It is for these reasons that environmental issues like climate change were discussed to be the purview of social workers. These findings are consistent with the literature, which has suggested that environmental policy is social policy and vice versa, precisely for the reasons discussed here (Walliman, 2013). According to the NASW Code of Ethics, the social worker’s mandate is to: “...promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels,



and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs....” (as cited in Whitaker, 2007, Editor’s note). As Whitaker (2007) put it:

Climate change is the most important social welfare issue we face as social workers. Unless we bring our best thinking and organizing to bear on climate change, our work on all the other issues near and dear to our hearts runs the risk of being comparable to rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic (Para. 4).

This sentiment was echoed by Clark (2013), who said:

Our responsibility as social workers not only lies in understanding the repercussions of climate change overall, but also in serving as a voice for those who are left with little recourse when their neighbourhoods, homes or jobs are threatened through disaster, damage or degradation. We must not only protect our land, air and water, but our fellow community members and clients (Para. 11).

According to Moth and Morton (2009): “Social work service users are likely to be amongst those disproportionately affected [by climate change].” As such, it is the duty of social workers to take action on these issues because not doing so threatens the validity of all of the work that we do. If the environment is significantly compromised to the point where people can no longer live in many areas around the world, the health and wellbeing of the global population is disrupted, entire communities are displaced, entire ecosystems are eroded, and people are sick and dying all over the globe, what does it matter if we make significant strides in other areas of our practice? What does it matter if we improve some of the currently inequitable conditions for LGBTQIA folks, women, minorities, immigrants, refugees, the disabled, the poor, and the sick if we no longer have a viable place to live and work; if we no longer have a place in which we can survive, let alone thrive? All of these issues are, no doubt, important to social work as well, yet there is a significant and pressing need to expand our perspectives to include environmental issues or else we are missing an essential piece of humanity in our work.

In terms of social work skills, it was also revealed in this research that social workers who take action on environmental issues such as climate change believe that social workers possess a unique skill set that is well equipped to manage these issues, that other professions do not necessarily possess in the same ways. This is consistent with the literature. As lawyer, scientist, and former first advisor on climate change to the President of the United States, Gus Speth, was quoted saying at an environmental conference:

Thirty years ago, I thought the top three global environmental problems were biodiversity loss, ecosystem collapse, and climate change. I was convinced that with enough good science, we would be able to solve these problems. But I was wrong. The real problems are bigger than that. They are things like selfishness, greed, and apathy. For those kinds of problems, good science isn't enough. For that we need a spiritual and cultural transformation. And we scientists don't know how to do that (as cited in Madhavan, Oakley, Green, Koon, & Low, 2013, p. 35).

As Dominelli (2011) highlighted, social workers play significant roles in dealing with these issues, including:

...helping people understand the issues; promoting sustainable energy production and consumption; mobilising people to protect their futures through community social work; and proposing solutions to greenhouse gas emissions... social workers can foster climate change endeavours that are equitable for all (Abstract).

These sentiments have been echoed by many other social workers who have been discussing these issues (Boddy, 2014; Clark, 2013; Kemp & Palinkas, 2015; Moth & Morton, 2009; Ife, 2007; Surgitha & Little Flower, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015; Walliman, 2013; Whitaker, 2007).

Based on my own experience, I would have to agree that social workers do have many skills that can help to deal with environmental issues like climate change, from micro up to macro practice. In terms of micro social work practice, clinicians are going to be crucial in responding to the impending influx of climate refugees, by providing crisis counselling and connecting individuals to direct services in the community. Furthermore, by expanding current

therapy models to be inclusive of environmental issues, clinicians can become better at assessing the impacts of environmental issues on the local level. We do not ask these questions and, therefore, we cannot understand how they manifest. Biopsychosocial environmental assessments could help to illuminate the impacts that environmental stressors play in our clients' lives. Where do they live? Are they exposed to toxins in the air, land, water in their neighbourhoods? Have their houses been painted with lead-based paints? Are they disconnected from nature? And what effects do all of these things have on their psychosocial functioning? Do these things impact their mental health, their gene expression, their interpersonal relationships, their behaviours, their emotions, etc.? How do these things impact our assessments of them in clinical practice and how can we factor these issues into a comprehensive, wholistic treatment plan? There is a growing body of literature that assesses the negative impacts of all of these issues on our wellbeing, yet social workers do not consider these issues. We will never know if we never ask.

In terms of meso social work practice, community development and education are critical pieces to taking action on environmental issues. There are still powerful lobbies of climate deniers out there that are paid to protect the interests of capitalism at all costs. Strict environmental regulations and sanctions would be a complete disaster for corporations, as the central tenet of big business is to grow profits, regardless of the individual, social, or environmental impacts. If there is ever any alternative corporate practice available that is cheaper (i.e. energy, labour, materials, etc.) than that alternative becomes the obvious choice in most cases, not because of evil intent but because of free market natural selection – eat or be eaten. As such, social workers have a role to play in community education to ensure that the

public is not being misled by confusing scientific jargon or by erroneous illusions that may suggest that scientific debates are balanced on these issues due to media reporting guidelines. Social workers also have a role to play in things like encouraging educational reforms by increasing children's opportunities for critical thinking, environmentalism, and overall scientific aptitude, so that successive generations are better prepared to make informed decisions. Furthermore, social workers have skills to build up community strengths, decreasing reliance on free market capitalism through projects like community gardens, toy and tool-lending libraries, skill shares, trade and barter economies, etc., as well as getting people back out into nature in general, restabilising that connection to the environment that has been demonstrated to increase our health, wellbeing, empathy, and altruism and unlock our innate desire to protect our Mother Earth that nourishes us all so well (Parks Canada, 2014; Williams, 2015).

In terms of macro social work practice, social workers have skills in terms of research, policy analysis, and policy development. At the end of the day, if we do not address the structural issues that are at the root of the environmental degradation that leads to unhealthy communities and individuals in the first place – namely capitalism and the neoliberal ideology that sustains it, then all of the other work that we do will, indeed, be like rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic. It may look nicer on the surface but the ship is still going to sink, taking all the neatly arranged chairs along with it. All of our action with individuals, communities, and the environment will mean nothing if we never address the capitalist practices that keep allowing new environmental, community, and individual issues to be born. Therefore, social workers have a role to play in developing sustainable, healthy, inclusive policies; educating the community about the issues in society and the benefits of supporting new policies and new

ways of knowing, being, seeing, and doing; supporting community development initiatives that focus on connecting others to their communities and environments; and supporting individuals who have become the inevitable by-products of a free market capitalist system that privileges the very few to the detriment of the many. Social workers have these skills. There is no consensus, however, in which skills actually constitute social work, which is an ongoing debate. Nonetheless, there seems to be an overall acknowledgment of the basic micro, meso, and macro level skills as described throughout this research. My alma mater, Laurier, has initiated a blending of the macro and micro specializations in their social work program this year, which will hopefully produce more well-rounded social workers and finally put this debate to rest.

***There are a number of barriers and helping factors that influence social work (in)action on environmental issues like climate change***

The second main take away from this thesis research was that there are a number of barriers and helping factors that contribute to social work inaction and action on environmental issues like climate change. In terms of barriers, none of the informants had been exposed to environmental issues at all in their social work training, which is consistent with my research. A scan of the BSW and MSW program descriptions across Ontario revealed that in the 2015-2016 academic year, there was not a single course offered that was dedicated to environmental issues. In fact, the majority of courses were focused on clinical practice. While there are professors at a few of the social work universities in Ontario who have written papers on these issues who, most likely, bring those discussions into their classrooms, much like the faculty informants in this study, there was no single course dedicated to those issues, specifically. As was highlighted in this study, bringing this information in can be a challenge without the language or models in which to do so. This is especially challenging in clinical practice.

This is not an issue everywhere; rather, it appears to be a particular issue in Canadian social work schools. A brief scan of MSW programs revealed much of the same issues in British Columbia, Québec, and Newfoundland. Looking South of the border, you start to see the idea of environmental social work incorporated into social work education. For example, San Diego State University in the USA boasts a “BASW Environmental Social Work Specialization.” According to their website: “The Environmental Social Work Specialization is for pioneering students who are interested in working at the community level regarding environmental justice or equal access to clean air and water and decision-making regarding the living environment” (San Diego State University, 2015, Para.1).

The same can be found in Australia at Charles Sturt University. According to their website:

CSU social work academics are involved in a wide range of research projects related to ecology and the environment. Their research includes projects and publications related to the social impacts of climate change, eco-feminist perspectives, expanding the domain of social work to include environmental factors, curriculum development, ethical considerations, and post-conventional approaches to social work practice (Charles Sturt University, 2016, Para. 1 and 2).

It should be noted that these programs are not ubiquitous in these areas; they are few and far between, as Western social work practice across the globe is only beginning to consider these issues. This issue is something that resonated with me, personally, as an MSW student who has also not had any exposure to these issues in any of my classes. It is not something that we talk about as social workers and, given the evidence thus far, it really should be.

In terms of the Western cultural mindset, the informants highlighted the tendency in social work to separate the individual from the physical environment. This is consistent with the literature review, as well as my personal experience as a social worker-in-training. As an example, in my social policy class, I had a teacher that insisted that climate policy is not social

policy. This was the topic that my group had selected for our presentation. We were challenged to justify how this related to social policy on a few occasions. We were allowed to proceed with the presentation and still received a good grade for it, yet we were told that we could not use our group topic for the final paper, as the other groups were allowed, since it is public policy, not social policy. This is very reflective of the cultural mindset right now in Western social work; that environmental policy is not social policy, and vice versa, and this is precisely the ideological shift that is required in social work if we are going to remain relevant as a profession. We cannot deny taking action on issues that have very real individual and community consequences. As Dewane (2011) put it:

Social work purports to use an ecological and systems approach to help people with their problems, yet that “ecology” rarely takes into account the implications of the unhealthy and depleted ecology we all share...Although social work previously considered involvement with improving the natural world to be for environmentalists, this exclusion is no longer acceptable. If social workers know that context is a prime determinant for quality of life, the deteriorating natural world must become part of social workers’ concern (Para. 5).

As such, attention needs to be paid to how we interpret the person-in-environment perspective that is typically applied in social work practice. As the informants highlighted, this concept needs to be expanded to include consideration of the person in the physical, as well as the social environment. As Kemp and Palinkas (2015) noted:

Robust attention to the environmental dimensions of social work’s person-in-environment mandate will be central to the profession’s efforts to attract new, diverse, and innovative groups to join in seeking social justice for all, particularly those made vulnerable by environmental change. Nonetheless, the complexity and urgency of the challenge demand more assertive, forward-thinking, comprehensive, and innovative responses than social work has demonstrated to this point (p. 4).

Other writers on this topic have echoed these same sentiments (Boddy, 2014; Dominelli, 2011; Teixeira & Krings, 2015)

In terms of professional opportunities, the informants discussed how there really is not any room for social workers to take paid action on these issues at the present moment. While their social work skills like community organizing, policy analysis, and research can be leveraged into positions that do environmental work, they are typically not hired as social workers for these types of jobs. Even conducting a job search for social workers in Ontario currently returns mostly clinical counselling positions. There is not a single position related to the environment. Environmental organizations in Ontario, on the other hand, do not even have positions available for social workers on their staff at all. This really speaks to how difficult it is for social workers to become involved with these issues, apart from volunteering at organizations that do this work in their communities, incorporating existing literature into their classrooms and clinical practices, and conducting research on these issues, which is likely very much tied to the fact the social workers do not learn about these issues in Canada. Indeed, in California, USA, the same state that hosts San Diego State University and their environmental social work specialization, there are opportunities to get involved with local eco social work organizations such as the Committee on Environmental Justice, which is hosted by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2016), and Social Workers for Environmental Justice (USC Sustainability, 2010), as just two examples. While we can easily find many environmental organizations and social work organizations in Canada, there are no readily apparent environmental social work organizations in which to get involved with.

In terms of the lack of apparent need to take action on climate change in day-to-day interactions with the individuals that social workers support, the most interesting finding is that, while some social workers feel as though they do not see these issues in their day-to-day



work, perhaps it is because they do not have the tools, language, or models to assess that need accurately. Maybe it is because they do not ask about it and, as such, it is out of mind, out of sight. More training on these issues, in tandem with an ideological shift to include ecological perspectives in social work as a profession, could reveal how distal or not these issues really are from social work. If we conducted biopsychosocial environmental assessments, perhaps this would reveal more about the impacts of environmental issues on the people that social workers support.

Finally, in terms of the fear of appropriation of Indigenous ideas, it is important to note that, while it is essential that we work with our Indigenous peoples in deriving impactful solutions to climate change, we must be very careful that we do this work in a way that honours and respects their knowledges and worldviews and that does not appropriate and repackage them as our own, new ideas, as has been typical in the Western world. As Tashka Yawanawa put it: “We are tired of anthropologists, environmentalists, church-related organizations, and other specialists speaking for us and using us for their self-interest. Please respect our self-determination to make our own decisions” (as cited in Betancourt, 2013, Para. 1). It is imperative that our Indigenous peoples take the lead on this work and that they are in the lead throughout the entire process. These perspectives are critical in our understanding of how to reconnect people back to their environments, which will be a crucial part of how we are going to shift the cultural consciousness on these issues (IPCC, 2014a).

In addition to the barriers that social workers face, it was also revealed in this research that social workers who deal with environmental issues like climate change have experienced some factors that have helped them to take action on these issues. In terms of exposure to the

issues, this is not surprising considering that the biggest barrier to action was a lack of exposure to the issues in their social work training. It is important to note that every single informant that discussed this helping factor was exposed to the issues within a social work context. Most were working as trained social workers within communities that were experiencing these issues first hand, and one was doing their PhD dissertation in social work. That is an important finding because most, if not all social workers in Canada already know about climate change, yet, as the informants discussed, and as the literature highlights, many of them are not able to see how this is a social work problem, which is likely because of their particular social work mindset described earlier. The reason that the study informants took action is because they experienced the issues first hand in an environment where they were already enacting social work skills and this is, arguably, why they were better able to see how those issues were connected with the work that they do as social workers. As such, exposure to the issues is not enough in its own right to engage social workers; rather, it is exposure within a social work context that is important, such as in the social work literature, in the organizations that employ social workers, and in the classrooms and practicum placements of social workers-in-training.

This finding is consistent with my experience as well. I was trained in Sociology and Psychology at Trent University in Peterborough. Trent is well known in Ontario as an environmentally focused institution. I was quite surprised to learn about environmental issues in courses such as Critical Criminology and Social Inequality, yet environmental issues were often a part of the discussion throughout my undergraduate degree. This is why I decided to take an environmental perspective in my MSW. I did not expect to be met with the resistance that I was in approaching this topic, as I assumed that these issues would have been a part of

the discussion in my social work training as well. Sociology and social work are similar in many ways, yet they differ significantly on this issue. For example, when conducting a brief environmental scan of Sociology course descriptions across Ontario universities, most, if not all, have courses dedicated specifically to environmental issues (Trent University, n.d.; University of Toronto, 2015; University of Windsor, 2015; Wilfrid Laurier University, 2016a). Nonetheless, I was exposed to these issues within a training environment that was focused on social issues, much like social work is, which is why I argue that exposure to these issues within a social work context will likely lead to more social work involvement with these issues.

In terms of social work training as a helping factor, this was an interesting finding because it highlighted the positive aspects of the social work experience – that it is not all doom and gloom. Social work training equipped these social workers with excellent skills to make a positive difference in the world, which is why they got involved in the work that they did in the first place, even before they were exposed to the environmental issues that they would eventually work with. Social work has a lot to offer in terms of training social workers to make positive social change. The informants in this study highlighted several of such skills that they could bring the bear on these issues, as outline previously. Social work is just missing a crucial piece to the puzzle right now, in terms of thinking from an environmental perspective, which is something that we need to work toward.

In terms of exposure to Indigenous teachings, informants discussed how these teachings reinforce our interconnectedness with our physical and social environments. These concepts are not mutually exclusive; rather, they are fluid. Indigenous approaches to social work understand this fact and already operate from this perspective. When analyzing the course

descriptions of the MSW Aboriginal Field of Study at Wilfrid Laurier University (2016b), there is reference to “Creation,” (rather than environment) in two out of the seven courses. Healing in Aboriginal approaches to social work, as such, focus on “enhancing the nature of Creation for future generations” (Wholistic Healing Practices), which is not a concept discussed in Western traditions of social work in general, let alone in the clinically-focused courses that discuss interventions for healing.

In terms of feeling a sense of responsibility, one informant discussed how this is fostered in social work training. The issue is that, if social workers are never exposed to environmental issues like climate change within a social work context, they are less likely to feel a sense of responsibility for those particular issues. When they feel a sense of responsibility for these issues, as is the case with the informants in this study, then they are more likely to take action and open up areas in which social workers can engage with these issues. Two other informants talked about how this idea of responsibility is particularly embedded within the Indigenous worldviews and how this has helped to shape the social workers and individuals that they are today.

### **Implications of the findings**

A number of implications of the findings for social work research, practice, and education are explored below.

#### ***Research***

In terms of social work roles, this research highlighted the roles that social workers currently *are* playing in dealing with environmental issues. Future research could explore, in more detail, what roles social workers *should* be playing, as well as how these roles should or

could be incorporated into social work. Furthermore, if social work is to remain relevant as a profession, then we need to consider an interpretation of our mandate and skill set that is inclusive to environmental issues. Future research could explore the social work mandate and skill set in more detail with a more diverse and representative sample than was possible in this study. An adaptation of this research's findings into a quantitative survey could be administered to social workers across Canada to get a sense for how social workers conceive of their mandate, addressing any provincial and territorial differences in approaches, as well as to develop a more comprehensive list of social work skills that can be utilized to mitigate environmental issues like climate change.

In order to address the "lack of training" barrier, future research could look at developing best practices for bringing environmental issues into the classrooms of social workers-in-training by conducting interviews and focus groups with environmental social workers who already do this. In addition, researchers could focus on drawing key learnings from the schools of social work that already incorporate these principles into their social work training. In terms of the "cultural mindset" barrier, more research simply needs to be done, in order to expose more social workers to these issues. Research could seek to create the language and framework for social workers to engage with environmental issues by focusing on the ways in which existing models of social work practice can be expanded and new models can be developed with these principles in mind. To address the "lack of professional opportunities" barrier, future research could explore ways in which we can open up more opportunities for social workers to get involved with these issues as paid professionals, whether by opening up positions at existing agencies or developing new ones. In terms of addressing the "lack of

apparent need to act in day-to-day work” barrier, future research could assess the “out of mind, out of sight” finding of this research, which asserted that social workers may not see the apparent need to act because these issues are not on their radar. This could be accomplished by conducting interviews and focus groups with environmental social workers for feedback on best practices. Finally, in order to address the “fear of appropriation of Indigenous ideas” barrier, it is suggested that researchers ensure that they are conducting research that is more inclusive, participatory, and Indigenous-led whenever possible.

Lastly, in terms of the factors that help social workers to take action, more research is required to confirm the assertion that exposure to environmental issues is ideal within a social work context in order to encourage social work action on these issues. Future research could also seek a better understanding of the knowledges and traditions of Indigenous social workers, while being careful not to appropriate or repackage these ideas in new ways, and while honouring and acknowledging where this knowledge originates. It is strongly suggested that great care be taken to ensure that this research is done with the approval and involvement of the Indigenous Peoples who preserve this knowledge.

### ***Practice***

In terms of social work roles, it is recommended that the social work professional guidelines be expanded to include consideration of the environment in the definition of the social worker’s role (mandate). Professional organizations that engage in social work practices could make more of an effort to expand their thinking about how these issues intersect with the work that they do and how they can expand the roles of their staff members to account for these kinds of issues. In addition, as the research highlighted, some social workers feel a duty to

act outside of their paid positions, as there is no clear division between the professional and personal self. As such, social workers may want to try to consider some of the ways in which they may be able to incorporate environmental perspectives into their day-to-day work in their classrooms, organizations, communities, and personal lives. Social workers could also be creative in how they apply their particular skills, searching for new ways to adapt their skills to environmental issues that intersect with their day-to-day work.

In terms of mitigating barriers, social work organizations could refer to the existing literature on these issues and identify opportunities to incorporate any learnings into their staff training. It is also recommended that they review their mission statements, visions, and other organizational definitions and revise accordingly to reflect the expanded definition and interpretation of “person-in-environment,” as described in this research. Furthermore, it is recommended that they attempt to reduce the fear of appropriation of Indigenous ideas by expressly acknowledging all instances where Indigenous traditions are borrowed, as well as by honouring the original presentation of these practices without repackaging them in new ways. In addition, social workers, themselves, could seek exposure to these issues by reading the literature and making connections in their day-to-day work and to align themselves with this new way of thinking about social work research, practice, and education. It is recommended that social workers keep these issues in the back of their mind in order to stay attuned to them, which may allow any potential connections between environmental issues like climate change and their day-to-day work with the people that they support to become more readily apparent. They could also consider new ways in which they can open up avenues for this kind of work.

In terms of helping factors, it is recommended that social work practice seeks to align itself more closely with the worldviews, traditions, and practices of Indigenous social workers, especially in terms of the incorporation of the environment in our understandings of people, places, space, and time. This should be done with the consent and guidance of the Indigenous peoples who protect and preserve this knowledge.

### ***Education***

In terms of social work roles, it is recommended that social work educators begin exposing social workers-in-training to the potential avenues through which they may begin to explore these roles and encourage creative thinking in terms of determining new ways that social workers can engage with these issues. It is also recommended that they be exposed to the interpretation of the social work mandate as provided by the informants in this study, as well as the ways in which social workers can utilize and adapt their training for various social ills, including environmental issues. In learning how to apply their new skills to impromptu and obscure issues will allow social workers better transferability of their skills as each situation calls for. This will create more diverse professionals in the process, who are not only better prepared to tackle issues like climate change, but are also better able to see how their skills relate to these kinds of issues, as well as any other social issues that may arise.

In terms of barriers, social work educators could refer to the literature for ideas about incorporating these issues into the classrooms of social workers-in-training and expose social workers-in-training to the expanded definition of the person-in-environment, as presented in this research. It is recommended that social workers-in-training be challenged to conceive of new ways that existing or new models can emerge to reflect this new understanding of the



person-in-environment. They could also be exposed to the ways in which they can currently get involved with these issues and challenged to think creatively about the avenues they can open up to address these issues in new ways. They could also be encouraged to develop new ways that we can think of, talk about, and incorporate environmental issues into social work practice. Furthermore, it is recommended that classes of social workers-in-training incorporate the traditions and teaching of Indigenous social workers as much as possible, in meaningful ways and in ways that acknowledge their source without repackaging them.

Finally, in terms of helping factors for taking action on environmental issues, it is recommended that social work educators make every effort to fit these concepts into their syllabus and challenge social workers-in-training to apply their developing skills to these kinds of issues. In addition, educators could incorporate Indigenous social work teachings into the classroom of non-Indigenous social workers-in-training. Guests who practice Indigenous social work may be best to serve this role to ensure the true essence is conveyed and respected.

### **Knowledge mobilization**

#### ***Conferences***

The learnings discovered throughout this thesis research would be a timely and important addition to any upcoming social work conferences, in order to shed some light on this up and coming area of social work inquiry, practice, and education. I would be more than happy to be a leading voice on these issues in Canada and am actively seeking opportunities to engage in these discussions across the country.

### ***Workshops***

A crucial knowledge mobilization piece that came out of my research data was the need to engage social workers-in-training on these issues within a social work context. I welcome opportunities to present at Faculties of Social Work across Canada in order to highlight the findings of this research and begin these important conversations with developing social workers. Workshops could also be developed for social work organizations from micro to macro practice in order to engage practicing social workers with these issues and increase their awareness of them.

### ***Journal publications***

I have full intentions of getting this research published in at least two social work journals, which my thesis adviser has graciously offered to support me on. There is also the potential to expand publication to environmental journals as well.

### ***Tool development***

A possible avenue of knowledge mobilization could be the development of a tool for social workers to use in practice. As this research highlighted, many social workers feel that the lack of access to tools, models, and a common language in dealing with environmental issues like climate change in social work serves as a barrier to their ability to take more action in their day-to-day work and in their classrooms with social workers-in-training. The development of an initial tool for bringing these concepts into social work organizations and classrooms could help to begin this crucial process.

### ***Books***

Given the scarcity of research and current knowledge mobilization attempts on the topics covered in this thesis, there is the potential opportunity to write books about the findings of this research and any subsequent research completed. Furthermore, there is the opportunity to contribute chapters to other books that are being developed that would like to incorporate these ideas. I welcome any opportunity to add this knowledge in any way possible.

### ***Research grants/PhD dissertation***

Finally, in completing this research I have a strong desire to continue developing it by addressing some of the questions that came up throughout the process, as discussed. I would like to apply for research grants or get involved with existing research in order to address these issues and add to this growing body of knowledge. In the coming years, I would also like to carry this research forward into the completion of a PhD dissertation that is more solution-focused, bringing together this research and all other research that I complete between now and then.

### **Limitations and strengths of this research**

Firstly, I argue that humans can never be unbiased, even in quantitative research. The very fact that we think, speak, and write in a particular language that is embedded with cultural symbols and assumptions precludes our ability to be value-neutral in anything – from selecting a research topic, to developing a research question, to interpreting research results. The fact that qualitative research owns that fact up front, and actively engages in processes to challenge those assumptions against and throughout the research process is a strength of this research. As discussed in the methodology section, several processes were undertaken to ensure the

trustworthiness of this research, including triangulation, member checking, reflexive journaling, and maintaining a consistent audit trail.

Secondly, in terms of sampling design, the main limitation of using convenience sampling is that my results may have limited transferability outside of social workers in Southwestern Ontario. Further research would be required in order to assess the potential for transferability of this research in other contexts. A quantitative application of this research would serve this purpose well. The benefit of using convenience sampling, on the other hand, is that the informants were easier to access in a short period of time.

The limitation of criterion sampling is that the criterion I set may be influenced by my own views as to what constitutes purposeful knowledge and who is in possession of it (Creswell, 2007). Care was taken to ensure that the criterion set was confirmed using triangulation with my thesis advisers and colleagues. The criterion was initially only registered social workers but it was brought to my attention that this is a very limited view of social work and that allowing informants to self-identify was more inclusive and appropriate for the aims of this research study. The benefit of using criterion and snowball sampling, on the other hand, is that they increased quality assurance (Creswell, 2007), which helped to increase the trustworthiness of this study by including only those informants with the most relevant information on this topic. This is important when considering that the use of convenience sampling can negatively affect trustworthiness by including only those who are convenient to access. In this way, the three sampling methods helped to strengthen each other.

Thirdly, in terms of data collection, the major limitation of using semi-structured interviews is that the questions may be leading due to my own inherent bias as a human being

(Creswell, 2007). As discussed, great care was taken to ensure that the questions asked were indeed rooted in the research and not my own bias. Interviews were also time consuming and labour intensive at all stages of the research process. On the other hand, they did provide more flexibility and creativity of responses than structured interviews could have allowed. A semi-structured approach also provided some quality assurance and consistency between interviews that would not have been possible with unstructured interviews, which increased the trustworthiness of this study, while still allowing for the exploration of the subjective understandings and experiences of the informants (Creswell, 2007).

The benefit of using interview notes is that they allowed me to jot down initial insights and key points in the moment, which helped when I was summarizing answers back to the informants to ensure I understood what they were saying. It was also helpful in terms of highlighting some of the key themes that emerged during the interview process. The limitation was that the notes were developed in an unstructured, organic fashion. Insights, as such, were in the moment reactions that did not necessarily come about through reflexive thought. This presented some possible challenges because unstructured notes are far more difficult to compare from interview to interview. Although the findings are far more rich and nuanced, the process is much more time consuming and very fragile to being influenced by personal biases. A lot of care had to be taken when developing themes to ensure that the interview notes were not just reflections of what I already believed coming into this research and, when they were confirming of my beliefs, that those impressions were rooted in what the informants were actually saying. Keeping my own views at the forefront of my mind, summarizing informant responses back to them in my own words, member checking, triangulation, and reflexive

journaling went a long way to ensuring that my impressions during the interviews were as valid and unbiased as possible.

The benefits of using summary transcriptions of the interviews included having a detailed record of the research process (audit trail), thereby increasing accountability and transparency, as well as justification for changes as the research evolved, with the added benefit of taking far less time to complete than verbatim transcriptions. As Halcomb and Davidson (2006) reported, a lot of errors are made in the process of transcription and, as such, the best data recording method involves the use of field notes taken during or immediately after conducting interviews, in addition to recordings and transcriptions, to ensure a well-rounded approach. Verbatim transcription is not always necessary when using these supplementary data recording methods (Halcomb & Davidson, 2006). As such, I did not record every sentence restart, “um,” repetitions, or when the informants coughed or talked to someone else, unless I could clearly make a case as to why including that information was beneficial for the research. For example, I included instances of repetition when it was clear that the information was being repeated because it was a point that the informant felt very strongly about, which I then included as a part of the results and discussion. The limitation of not using verbatim transcriptions, on the other hand, is that the data that was omitted may have had some meaning to the research and was only discarded due to biased assumptions on my part. As in the other cases where bias was of concern, I was careful to ensure that this was not the case by engaging in the constant reflexive practices described above throughout the entire research process.

Fourthly, in terms of the context specific limitations of this particular research study, all of the informants were social workers who already believed that social work should be taking action on these issues. As they noted, social work as a profession, and social workers as a result, do not necessarily share these sentiments because of their particular mindset. As such, it would be interesting to know why some social workers do not feel as though this is a social work issue, as was the case with my professor, which is not something that this study was able to address because of the particular, limited sample that was obtained. Nonetheless, the results of this research study were very revealing. Future research is required to get the full picture of what is happening in terms of social work disengagement with issues like climate change, as outlined throughout this thesis, which can be accomplished in part by actively seeking out the negative cases that disagree that environmental issues are the purview of social work, cases that are ambivalent on social work involvement with these issues, and cases that had not previously considered this opportunity. The results of this study could be adapted into a quantitative survey and administered to social workers and social workers in training across Canada in order to get a clearer picture of these issues.

## **Conclusions**

Historically, social workers have not had a lot to say on environmental issues like climate change. Although we are starting to see a shift in this dialogue, the conversation has generally revolved around the fact that social workers should be playing a much larger role in dealing with these issues than they currently do. This research study sought to understand what role, if any, that social workers can play in dealing with environmental issues such as climate change, as this is the biggest environmental issue that humanity currently faces, and to address what

barriers there are, if any, that may be limiting social work action on these issues, since there is currently a lack of literature in social work to address them.

There are two key messages that were inferred from the results of this research study. First, social workers have a role to play in dealing with environmental issues like climate change, due to the specific skills that they hold and the mandate of their profession. Second, there are a number of barriers and helping factors that contribute to social work (in)action on these issues. A central feature of the previous discussion was the cultural mindset of Western social work that views the individual as separate from their physical environment. As the informants in this study highlighted, and as has always been understood in Indigenous social work traditions, these two concepts cannot be separated; rather, they must be viewed as interdependent and interconnected, as well as mutually reciprocal and reinforcing in how they influence one another. This mindset limits exposure to environmental issues in the field of social work, which results in a lack of opportunities to get involved with these issues as social workers, which then limits social workers' abilities to connect these issues in their day-to-day work. As such, the profession of social work as a whole needs to undergo an ideological shift in order to expand their understanding and definition of the person-in-environment to mean the person in the physical, as well as social environment. In doing so, social workers will be able to open up professional opportunities and expand their roles in these areas. By bringing the necessary skills that are currently required to mitigate these issues, social workers can promote meaningful changes to the health and wellbeing of individuals and communities across the globe, while maintaining their credibility as a profession. Not doing so threatens the very validity of the work that we do. In order to accomplish such an ideological shift, it is



recommended on the basis of this research that social work begins to more closely align itself with Indigenous worldviews and teachings and redefine how we think about, speak about, and practice social work.

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## Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What role, if any, do you play as a social worker in dealing with environmental issues like climate change? If nothing currently, what should you do, as a social worker, to deal with these issues?
  - What is your mandate as a social worker?
  - What is your understanding of climate change?
  - Does climate change fit into your mandate as a social worker?
    - Why or why not?
  - What specific social work skills do you have that can help to deal with climate change?
2. Based on your own experience as a social worker, what barriers do you face in dealing with environmental issues like climate change?
  - What barriers have you faced in trying to address these issues?
  - What has stopped you from taking action?
  - What has helped you to take action?

## Appendix B: Consent Form

### Informed Consent Statement

Principal Investigator: Tina J Cumby  
Faculty Advisors: Eliana Suarez and Gus Hill

You are invited to participate in a research study. The purpose of this study is to determine what role social workers have to play, if any, in dealing with climate change and what barriers there have been to action on this issue. I will be completing this research as part of my Masters of Social Work (MSW) thesis.

#### INFORMATION

I, Tina Cumby, will be conducting interviews with informants that will last approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. More or less time will be given if needed or desired by the informants. Interviews will be conducted until there is consistency of answers between informants. The interviews will be audio recorded for the purpose of transcription, with your consent. If you do not consent to this, data will be recorded by hand. All data will be password encrypted on my personal computer and destroyed after 5 years.

**Do you consent to being audio recorded? Please initial: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_**

#### RISKS

- 1) Discussion about climate change may create discomfort for some informants. Although the questions do not discuss the impacts of climate change directly, this topic may bring up unsettling feelings. Should you experience significant discomfort, please refer to the following resources:

Here 24/7 (Crisis Line): 1-844-437-3247

WLU Counselling Services (appointments): 519-884-0710 x3146

UW Counselling Services (appointments): 519-888-4567 x32655

Waterloo Walk-In Clinic: 519-725-1514

- 2) You may be identifiable on the basis of your responses, particularly if you are well known in the wider community. However, all possible efforts will be made to protect your identity, as outlined in the "Confidentiality" section below.

**Would you like the opportunity to review your responses before use in the final report? Please initial: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_**

#### BENEFITS

Benefits of participation include adding to a limited body of research and encouraging action on climate change in the field of social work.

**Please initial to confirm that you have read and understood the above information: \_\_\_\_\_**

#### CONFIDENTIALITY

Informant transcripts will have all identifying information removed. In the final report, informants will only be referred to in general ways. Only I, as the principal investigator, will have access to the study data. The data will be password encrypted and stored on my personal computer for five years, at which point it will be destroyed. With your permission, anonymous quotations will be used to elaborate on the most important findings of the research.

**Do you agree to being anonymously quoted? Please initial: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_**

#### CONTACT

If you have any questions about this study, or if you experience adverse effects as a result of your participation, you may contact the researcher at [cumb3130@mylaurier.ca](mailto:cumb3130@mylaurier.ca). If you feel that you have not been treated according to the descriptions in this form or that your rights have been violated during the course of this project, you may contact Dr. Robert Basso, Chair, University Research Ethics Board, Wilfrid Laurier University, at 519-884-0710 x4994 or [rbasso@wlu.ca](mailto:rbasso@wlu.ca).

#### PARTICIPATION

This project has been reviewed and approved by Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board (#4597). Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline participation at any time without penalty. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. If you withdraw, all data collected from you will be removed and destroyed. You have the right to omit any question(s)/procedure(s) that you choose.

#### FEEDBACK AND PUBLICATION

The results of this research will be submitted for publication in academic journals. Any informants who would like a final copy of the report can request one. Results should be available around summer 2016.

**Would you like a copy of the final report? Please initial: YES \_\_\_\_\_ NO \_\_\_\_\_**

#### CONSENT

**I have read and understand the above information and I have received a copy of this form. I understand the risks and benefits to my participation and I, hereby, give my consent to freely participate in this study.**

Informant signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Investigator signature \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## Appendix C: Information Letter

Hello!

My name is Tina Cumby and I am completing my Masters degree in Social Work at Laurier University. As part of my degree, I am completing a thesis. My research is seeking to understand what perceived role, if any, social workers think they have to play in dealing with the issue of climate change and what barriers they perceive, if any, that limit their action in this area. I invite you to participate in this very exciting research project!

I am conducting this research because I have found that there is a lack of literature available from social workers on this issue, which caused me to question if social workers think they have a role to play and, if so, what that role would or should look like, in their opinion. I am also interested in hearing why they think there is a lack of literature by social workers on climate change thus far.

I would love to get your feedback on this topic. I am looking to set up 45 minute to 1 hour interviews to explore these questions. Interviews can be conducted in person, over the phone, or through Skype – whichever is the most convenient for your schedule.

I have attached a consent form with a detailed explanation of this project for your review, including any possible risks and benefits to your participation.

I hope we can get a chance to talk about this very important topic. I look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,

Tina Cumby, BA (Hons.), MSW (Candidate)

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[cumb3130@mylaurier.ca](mailto:cumb3130@mylaurier.ca)