POISED FOR CHANGE:
SASKATCHEWAN UNDERGRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS’ UNDERSTANDING OF THE ENVIRONMENT

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By
Kristy Dawn Kominetsky
Regina, Saskatchewan
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Kristy Dawn Kominetsky, candidate for the degree of Master of Social Work, has presented a thesis titled, *Poised for Change: Saskatchewan Undergraduate Social Work Students’ Understanding of the Environment*, in an oral examination held on December 3, 2018. The following committee members have found the thesis acceptable in form and content, and that the candidate demonstrated satisfactory knowledge of the subject material.

External Examiner: *Dr. Robert Case, Renison University College*

Supervisor: Dr. Darlene Chalmers, Faculty of Social Work

Committee Member: *Dr. Gabriela Novotna, Faculty of Social Work*

Committee Member: Dr. Ailsa Watkinson, Faculty of Social Work

Chair of Defense: Dr. Tara Turner, Faculty of Indigenous Social Work

*via ZOOM*
Abstract

Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment and its relationship to Social work has primarily applied a person-in-environment framework to practice, which has evolved to almost exclusively mean the social environment. However, with the growing environmental crisis, social work can no longer ignore the natural environment and the impact it has on individuals and communities as well as the degradation of the environment itself. Despite the dearth of information on how to incorporate the physical and natural environment into social work practice, the literature beseeches social workers to address environmental concerns and issues.

The research question within this study asks: What is Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment? The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the physical environment, including environmental issues, and their relationship to social work practice. A qualitative research inquiry using constructivist grounded theory methodology was used to explore this issue.

A model was developed that represents Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment and its relationship to social work practice. The model includes what is needed by students for their role as future social workers in addressing environmental concerns and issues and how this can be achieved in their undergraduate social work education. This thesis concludes with implications for social work education and practice regarding the incorporation of the physical and natural environment in social work education and practice.
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Dedication

Dedicated to the loving memory of my parents,

John and Sherry
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Limited education

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Unprepared to include the environment in social work practice

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Chapter One: Introduction

Social work has characterized itself through its dual focus on the person and the environment, a construct widely identified as a person-in-environment (PIE) perspective (Norton, 2012). Since the development of the profession, PIE has evolved and the environment has come to almost exclusively mean the social environment, predominantly centring on aspects of social functioning, social networks, and social roles (Besthorn, 2013; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2010). The physical and natural environment is, for the most part, absent in social work practice. In spite of the profession’s declared focus on person and environment, core theories and models have continued to emphasize the person over the environment, with little or no concern for the physical environment (Zapf, 2009). This constricted view of environment is preventing social work from identifying and responding to deteriorating ecological systems, at a time when environmental destruction and degradation is now referred to by some social work scholars as a crisis (Besthorn, 2013; Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2014; Hoff & Pollack, 1993). Thus, it is imperative for the profession of social work to examine the ongoing impact that environmental degradation and destruction is having on the entire global population and the planet itself (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Coates, 2005; van Wormer, Besthorn & Keefe, 2007; Coates & Gray, 2012). An emerging group of social workers is implored the profession of social work to consider the impact of changes to the Earth’s environment and its effect on all living species (Besthorn, 2003, 2004, 2012; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates, 2003, 2004, 2005; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2014; Gray & Coates, 2015; Green & McDermont, 2010; Hawkins, 2010; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Jones, 2013; Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2012; Tester, 2013; van Wormer et al., 2007;
Zapf, 2009, 2010). This has come about mainly with the recognition that human welfare is inextricably tied to the welfare of the environment (Coates, 2005; Zapf, 2010).

A root cause of the declining health of the environment has been attributed to the dominant Western worldview of modernism (Coates, 2005; van Wormer et al., 2007; Tester, 2013). Modernism is defined as a worldview that sees humans as dominant over nature and believes natural resources should be used for the benefits of humanity (Coates, 2003, 2005). With values such as consumerism, materialism, individualism, patriarchy, progress and anthropocentrism, modernism favours economic, industrial, and technological growth. Modernism is concerned with the deterioration of the environment only if it negatively impacts human-beings, portraying humans as superior and separate from the physical environment (Coates, 2003, 2005; Zapf, 2010).

However, it is well documented that the well-being of all living creatures and the planet is interdependent (Berger & Kelly, 1993; Besthorn, 2012; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates, 2005, Norton, 2012, Zapf, 2009). Currently, environmental issues such as water pollution, forest destruction, climate change, soil erosion, natural disasters, and famine affect millions of people on a daily basis (Besthorn, 2013; Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2014). As such, it is increasingly evident that environmental issues are an important concern for the profession of social work (Coates, 2003; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Hoff & McNutt, 1994; Jones, 2013). Despite the concerns and calls to action, a gap exists in the literature as to what information social workers need about the environment and how they may include this knowledge in their practice.
Study Purpose

As a relatively new area in social work, the literature regarding environmental social work is primarily conceptual and theoretical. This literature is an important foundation for bringing the issues to light and challenging the profession to act upon them. However, few concrete ideas exist on the practical realities of incorporating the physical environment into social work practice. Furthermore, a more crucial question is if and how undergraduate social work students are being educated on the environment, its relevance to the profession, and what this will mean for them in their future practice. The literature has demonstrated that social work is ignoring its professional responsibility to the physical environment. Therefore, if the physical environment is immaterial at an undergraduate social work level, it will be difficult to establish this area as an integral aspect of standard social work practice.

As a result, an understanding of undergraduate social work students’ perspectives on the environment and how they connect this understanding with their personal and professional future as social workers is necessary. Thus, the research question for this study asks, “What is Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment?” The purpose of this study was to explore undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the physical environment, including environmental issues and their relationship to social work practice. Importantly this included examining what undergraduate social work students perceive as needed preparation for their future role as practitioners in addressing environmental concerns and how this can best be achieved in their undergraduate social work education. Therefore, the beliefs and ideas that Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work
(BISW) students in Saskatchewan have about the environment were investigated. The study contributes to the area of environmental social work by presenting undergraduate social work students’ perspectives on how they access knowledge about the environment and how they apply this knowledge to future social work practice. Additionally, the study builds upon established groundwork for suggesting changes to the social work curricula to include environmental issues and concerns as well as the interconnection between living species, human, non-human, and planetary well-being. An understanding of undergraduate social work students’ perception of the environment in relation to social work practice adds to an emerging paradigm shift in social work beliefs and values, creating possibility for restructuring social work practice. Generating opportunities for the profession to review its foundational knowledge of obligations to people and the environment allows for the critique of dominant perspectives whereby long standing worldviews can be contested and innovative perspectives considered.

**Discussion of Terms**

A number of terms are used in the literature on social work and the environment with no standard definition for environmental social work. Therefore, I am presenting a discussion on the four terms that were instrumental to my learning about social work and the environment and that informed this study. These terms emerged from my review of the literature and include environment, environmental social work, ecosocial work, and place.

For the purpose of this study, the term environment relates to the physical environment, both natural and built. The natural environment refers to all living and non-living things occurring naturally on Earth, while the built environment signifies the
environment that has been influenced by humans and where man has transformed the landscape (Germain & Gitterman, 1980). For example, the built environment includes city parks, transportation systems, schools, hospitals, and apartment complexes.

The second term, environmental social work is primarily conceptual and represents a set of values and beliefs. Thomas Doherty (2013) writes that “There is simply no way to approach the ‘facts’ of environmental social work” (xix). Doherty (2013) goes on to say that an individual’s social and cultural beliefs, as well as personal experiences, will influence their perception of environmental social work. Therefore, it is important to clarify the terms as I understand them and how I orientate myself to the language. Gray, Coates, and Hetherington (2013) state that the values and beliefs of environmental social work include accepting:

the scientific evidence where the predictions of disasters, such as drought, mudslides, floods, hurricanes, and environmental refugees are seen to be influenced by climate change on a planet substantially altered by human activities, such as globalization, deforestation, pollution, industrial agriculture, habitat destruction, soil problems (acidification, desertification, erosion, salinization, and soil fertility losses), water management problems (including ‘water wars’ and dam construction interfering with waterways), overhunting, overfishing, effects of introduced species on native species, species decline and species extinction, human population growth, and increased per capita impact of people (p. 2).

Environmental social work emphasizes humans’ connection to nature and contends that the profession must recognize the effect of climate-related issues on the human
population, the non-human population, and the planet (Gray et al., 2013). This means there are no hierarchies between environmental issues and human issues. A key principle is that environmental social work seeks to include all facets of life: human, non-human, and nature. Thus, environmental social work requires a mutual respect for individual world-views and opinions with the common belief that all humans can and must work together for a sustainable future rather than one overarching framework (Grey et al., 2013).

Third, ecosocial work is understood as a fundamental set of beliefs and values. Besthorn (2014) associates the following four principles with ecosocial work: 1) the term environment refers to the interconnection between humans and the natural world; 2) ongoing and critical analyses of the Western dominant world-view of modernity is needed; 3) intuitive ways of knowing, nonlinear thinking, emotional intelligence, indigenous ritual, and spirituality must all be seen as equal and valid systems of knowledge; and 4) a radical reorientation of social work is required from current anthropocentric beliefs and biases to an ecological consciousness. Alternatively, Zapf (2009) describes ecosocial work as “the interrelatedness of environmental, social, political and economic issues” (p. 181). Both environmental social work and ecosocial work are designed to critically engage the profession “in response to a deteriorating natural environment and its catastrophic impact on clients’ lives and the health of the planet” (Besthorn, 2014, p. 202). While these two terms have similar underlying principles and can be used interchangeably, I will be using the term environmental social work within this study. This term is most frequently used in the literature and a personal preference.
It is important to discuss physical location and place, which is the fourth term. Essentially, “geography affects both where and how people live. People experience and express an attachment to place and a sense of belonging. Place has meaning for people; identity is connected to place” (Zapf, 2009, p. 181). How a person acts or reacts in one setting may be different from another setting. For example, “Behaviour can be located in the physical environment. Understanding behaviour requires an understanding of the physical context, not just the social context” (Zapf, 2009, p. 74). As well, place can create issues of segregation, marginalization, and exclusion and be seen as a commodity, an asset, or as a resource (Zapf, 2009). People are shaped by their experiences within their environment in a multitude of ways. However, social work “with its psycho-social bias minimizes the role of physical environments (natural and built) in human well-being” (Kemp, 2011, p. 1200). The next section outlines how these terms influence my social work practice and established the importance and need for this study.

**Background to the Study**

At the outset of my Master of Social Work (MSW) degree I had no concept of environmental social work or what the term environment could mean to the profession. When the MSW program at the University of Regina offered Social Work (SW) 840 - Social Work and the Environment, I registered for the class. This was not because I was interested in learning about the topic but rather because I needed a course credit. I did not foresee the profound impact this class would have on my career or my personal life. Prior to this class I was already, albeit unknowingly, questioning the anthropocentric and egocentric views of modern society. For example, I made a shared decision with my husband not to have children, the initial reasoning being that this would lead to financial
security and the ability to spend a large disposable income on all the consumer products I wanted. In spite of this, I ruminated on how shopping left me feeling not only unsatisfied but also isolated and lonely. I was not comforted by the things I could buy.

When I began SW-840, I read about the environmental crisis and the impact it is having on the human population and the planet. I learned how the values of modernism, such as consumerism and materialism, are promoting the degradation of the Earth’s resources through exploitation and sustaining the present-day consumer culture of accumulating endless wealth and possessions (Besthorn, 2004; Coates, 2005). Furthermore, I realized that the need for individuality “has resulted in humans being detached, not only from nature, but also from each other” (Coates, 2005, p. 32). The significance of this is that if humans cannot bring themselves to care about each other, how can they possibly care about the environment?

Joanna Macy, an eco-philosopher (2013) coined the term the “greening of the self” (p. 45). The greening of the self or “ecological self” stems from the irrational belief that humans are above and separate from nature and that what we do as individuals cannot possibly affect others. The greening of the self “enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings” (Macy, 2013, p. 149). For example, Macy (2013) depicts that it would be irrelevant to convince a person not to saw off his leg as the leg is part of the body and would be an act of violence. Macy (2013) argues that the same is true of trees in the Amazon rain forest as they are our external lungs. Greening of the self is a metaphorical construct which “enables us to recognize our profound interconnectedness with all beings” (Macy, 2013, p. 149). My instinct to question the absence of connections originated from a growing consciousness that our self-interest
needs to include more than just ourselves. This discovery led me to become more open-minded and receptive to different ways of knowing, which have become key theoretical frameworks in how I view the world. Deep ecology and ecofeminism are two such frameworks.

Deep ecology concerns itself with issues of ecological justice as it applies to humanity’s relationship with nature. This is in opposition to shallow ecology, which is concerned with ecological problems because of the impact on human beings (Besthorn, 2012). Human beings are programmed to think that one has to be better than the other, human above nature. A deep ecological perspective endorses a balance between nature and humans. It shifts social work’s perception to one in which individuals recognize that they are one with all that exists and not separate from the environment (Besthorn, 2012).

Similarly, ecofeminism sees the inherent value of all beings, human and non-human, whereby no one part is greater than another. As such, humans are not above nature but rather interconnected (Besthorn, 2003). One of the key themes in an ecofeminist framework is to critique oppressive power structures. All forms of social domination, including those between humans and nature, are viewed as ecofeminist concerns (Besthorn, 2003; Besthorn & McMillen, 2003). Ecofeminism views human oppression and oppression of nature as equal forms of oppression.

My education about the environment did not end with the environmental social work class. I was able to carry the theme into the remainder of my graduate courses. As I applied my new-found knowledge, I realized how little my fellow students knew about environmental problems and their relevance to social work. Several times I heard the question, how is the environment a social work issue? This is not surprising given that I
had been a practicing social worker for over 10 years and had just discovered the interconnection for myself. While I was keen to share my knowledge and implement changes to social work practice, I paused. How could social workers possibly be expected to include the environment in their practice when there seemed to be limited awareness and, from my observations, a lack of personal connection. Hence, what surfaced was the need to explore what current social work students know about the environment, its role in their own lives and in their social work practice. The next section outlines the complexity of this issue.

**Statement of the Problem Area**

The environmental crisis is a multi-faceted issue and, as such, is beyond the scope of this study to define in its entirety. Nonetheless, it is important to provide select information, which will give some insight into the magnitude of this problem. According to Coates (2005), the environmental crisis “occurs as human activity uses more than nature can replenish and causes irreparable damage to land, water, air and people” (p. 26). There is an inability to recognize that current consumption levels are unsustainable and that there is a growing gap between ecological supply and demand. One and a half Earths are needed to meet the current demands of consumption and nearly four Earths are required for everyone to live the average American lifestyle (World Wide Fund for Nature [WWF], 2014). Overconsumption, defined as “when we take far more resources than we need and than the planet can sustain” (Leonard, 2010, p. 145), is causing irreparable damage to air, water, and soil in addition to the destruction of natural resources, species extinction, food insecurity and climate change.
These concerns are also recognized as human rights issues. The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNCHR) has formally acknowledged that the following human rights are impacted by climate change: the right to life, adequate food, water, health, adequate housing, and self-determination (United Nations Human Rights Council [UNHRC], 2009). In 2018, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) issued a special report on the climate-related risks for natural and human systems attributed to global warming. The report highlights a number of climate change impacts that could be avoided by limiting global warming to 1.5°C compared to 2.0°C or more. For example, extreme heat and storms as well as related outcomes like disease and poverty are projected to rise with temperatures (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change [IPCC], 2018).

Moreover, climate change affects individuals and groups disproportionately with women, children, Indigenous people, the elderly, the infirm, and those with low incomes being the most susceptible (UNHRC, 2009). As such, “inevitably it is the marginalized and disadvantaged people who suffer and will continue to suffer the greatest” (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013, p. 50). Further to this, Tester (2013) states that climate change is a class issue, having a greater effect on populations due to their geographical location and poverty. Therefore, although climate change is a global issue its effects will not be the same across the planet as some countries and regions are more at risk than others (Environmental Protection Agency [EPA], 2013).

To understand the dire importance of these statements, various examples of how environmental degradation, including climate change, affects the human population are provided. Environmental deterioration “is creating an ever increasing population of
human refugees attempting to escape their unsafe, threatening, and dangerous natural environments” (Besthorn & Meyer, 2010, p. 123). By 2050 it is estimated that there will be 150-200 million displaced persons due to climate change (Prieur, 2014). For women, escaping this plight means facing higher instances of violence, rape, human trafficking, and assault (Alston, 2014). Furthermore, women, account for 48-80 percent of all food production in developing countries (UN WomenWatch, 2011), making them notably impacted by their dependence on the natural environment for their livelihood and agricultural practices. For example, due to rapid forest destruction women in the Khul Gad micro watershed of Kumoun Himalaya have to travel nine to ten kilometres every day just to find wood and water. This distance translates to travelling between 3250 km to 3750 km in one year (Singh, 2014).

Low-income individuals often live in contaminated neighbourhoods, lack resources, and work in unsafe and poisonous conditions. The term environmental racism (van Wormer et al., 2007; Muldoon, 2006, Norton, 2012) refers to those communities who experience environmental hazards disproportionately to the rest of the population. For example, incinerators, toxic-waste dumps, contaminated air and drinking water and rivers are located markedly in African American neighbourhoods and Native American reservations in the United States (van Wormer et al., 2007). Environmental racism and discrimination in Canada is evident in the prevalence of unsafe drinking water on many First Nations reserves (Muldoon, 2006). According to Health Canada (2016), as of February 2016, 134 boil water advisories (BWA) were in effect for 85 First Nations communities across Canada, excluding British Columbia (which is managed by the First Nations Health Authority as part of the 2013 British Columbia Tripartite Framework
Agreement on First Nations Health Governance). First Nations communities are 2.5 times more likely to be under BWA than non-First Nation communities. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has declared the restricted access to safe drinking water as well as a lack of water regulations for First Nations living on reserves to be a human rights issue.

In Canada, common occurrences of forest fires and flooding have caused unprecedented evacuations in recent years. In 2015, forest fires in Northern Saskatchewan affected 13,000 individuals (CBC News, 2015) and in 2016, the largest wildfire evacuation in Alberta’s history forced 88,000 residents from the city of Fort McMurray (The Weather Network, 2016). Additionally, flooding in Alberta temporarily displaced an estimated 120,000 people from their homes in 2013 (International Displacement Monitoring Centre [IDMC], 2014), while massive flooding in the province of Manitoba in 2014 prompted the permanent displacement of the Lake St. Marie First Nation (Thompson, Ballard, & Martin, 2014).

Furthermore, Indigenous communities are disproportionately affected by environmental hazards. For the Inuit in Northern Canada, climate change and environmental degradation has damaged their culture, health, and economic well-being (Watt-Cloutier, 2015). For example, food security is affected with access to hunting areas dependent on the condition of sea ice and snow (Tester, 2013). Recognizing the impact of flooding in Indigenous communities, McNeill, Binns, and Singh (2017) conducted a study which characterized the severity of the problem. Between January 2006 and November 2016, 67 First Nation communities experienced close to 100 occurrences of flooding. The First Nation community of Kashechewan in Northern
Ontario was especially susceptible to flooding and evacuation during seven of the eleven years (McNeill, Binns, & Singh, 2017). Given the impact to human, social, cultural, and material costs of repeated flooding, a study conducted by Shaikh, Kauppi, and Case (2017) demonstrated the injustices faced by Kashechewan First Nation and the disparity of mitigation measures in Indigenous versus non-Indigenous communities regarding environmental threats.

With the environmental crisis situated in the dominant worldview of modernism, propelled by values such as consumerism, materialism, economics, and technology (Coates, 2003, 2005), most people have been lured into a false assumption that personal identity is tied to material possessions and that consumption of goods “will in the end alleviate poverty, spread democracy, and insure social and economic justice” (Besthorn, 2004, p. 27). In actuality, modernism is perpetuating the exploitation of people and the environment, enlarging the gap between the rich and the poor, which is leading to a decline in empathy for those who are disadvantaged (Coates, 2005). Therefore, continued destruction of nature will only increase inequality and discrimination among people.

A key problem is the assumption that modernism, a primarily Western worldview represents a universal viewpoint. Research indicates that it is not possible to treat individuals fairly or justly when universal approaches are applied (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006). However, “mainstream social work has not yet questioned its acceptance of modernity’s foundational beliefs and values” (Coates, 2005, p. 36). By default, the profession continues to align itself with these views. The profession has failed to recognize the connection between the exploitation of nature and the inherent
exploitation of people (Coates, 2005). Coates (2003) is critical of current social work practices that more often than not focus on helping people cope with, and adapt to, the stressors of modern life, rather than promoting a new, interconnected paradigm of existence.

Currently, the social work profession seems to be challenged by the idea that modernism is creating both ecological and social injustice (Coates, 2004). As such, a transformation to a holistic world-view is required. Attributes of a holistic world-view include empathy and compassion for people and nature and a willingness to act for the common good of all humankind and Earth (Coates, 2004). For the last 15 years a rising number of social workers (Besthorn & McMillen, 2003; Besthorn, Wulff & St. George, 2010; Coates 2003, 2005; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2010) have been calling for a major shift in social work theory and practice. Besthorn (2004) asserts that social work “must begin to incorporate insights from alternative theoretical models into a much richer and more complex worldview than that provided by traditional, neo-liberal, social welfare based economism” (p. 36). Social work is being challenged to a revolution against its existing support of modernism in exchange for a more holistic, all-inclusive framework of humans, non-humans, and the environment.

In summation, the unremitting environmental crisis is not just for ‘environmentalists’ to resolve. It is a complex issue rooted in the dominant worldview of modernism, involving human rights, racism, health concerns, and the probable collapse of the natural environment. It is vital that social workers increase their environmental awareness and adopt a new-found holistic paradigm, one that will allow
for the inclusion of the physical environment in practice. The next section expands on the implications of environmental problems for social work practice.

**Significance of the Study**

Ife (2012) states that “social work is arguably, the core human rights profession, given its value base encompassing of the full range of human rights within its practice” (p. 315). Human rights and social justice are fundamental standards of most social work codes of ethics as well as having a specific interest in working with people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty (Canadian Association of Social Workers [CASW], 2005; International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2012). However, by failing to recognize the impact that the mounting environmental crisis is having on human rights, social work is neglecting its ethical responsibilities. Coates (2004) states that environmental problems are linked to the kinds of issues with which social workers deal, and further to this, that environmental degradation is interconnected with social justice or rather social injustices. In other words, environmental justice equals social justice.

Social work is being challenged to expand its traditional definition of social justice. Besthorn (2012) calls for the inclusion of deep justice in social work. Deep justice recognizes that all living and non-living entities have the same intrinsic value and that social and ecological justices are intertwined. Miller, Hayward, and Shaw (2012) contend that “injustices arise from the imbalances in the relationship between humans and nature, especially giving priority to human needs, and thus subordinating the interests of other elements of the natural world” (p. 271). Environmental justice focuses on how the environment affects social justice issues (Coates, 2004), while ecological
justice takes those ideas and recognizes that the “human social world does not operate in
a silo separate from the rest of nature (Miller, Hayward & Shaw, 2012, p. 271). Coates
(2004) encourages the standpoint that the human world should be seen as part of the
Earth and the natural world, not the sole focus. Social work can play a key role in
bringing this new perspective to the forefront of society.

Social workers only need look as far as their governing bodies for direction.
Both the Canadian Association of Social Workers’ (CASW) Guidelines for Ethical
Practice and the International Federation of Social Workers’ (IFSW) Statements of
Ethical Principles requires that social workers “endeavour to advocate for a clean and
healthy environment” (CASW, 2005, p. 25) and “be concerned with the whole person,
within the family, community, societal and natural environments” (IFSW, 2012, para. 5).
If the profession of social work is committed to issues of human rights and social justice,
then it must start to include the environment in its scope of practice.

Additionally, social work has a role in promoting and strengthening human rights
and in empowering affected individuals, families, and communities. With core skills
such as networking, collaborating, advocacy, community, and capacity-building, linking
and engaging multiple sectors of marginalized people, social work should be “part of the
global movement to address environmental issues and steer humanity towards a
sustainable future” (Jones, 2013, p. 226). If this is the case, then it is imperative that
there is insight into what the next generation of social workers thinks about the
environment. There can be no change to practice without a detailed understanding of
how up-and-coming social workers view the issue and the roles that social work can
play.
An Overview of the Thesis

This thesis sets out to understand undergraduate social work students’ perspectives and views of the physical environment, including environmental issues and their relationship to social work practice. Much of the literature reviewed is theoretical and conceptual with a small number of research studies looking at the environment and environmental social work. A qualitative research design using grounded theory methodology, specifically constructivist grounded theory, was chosen for this study.

The research draws upon interviews with eleven undergraduate social work students located in the province of Saskatchewan. Data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously in order to conceptualize, categorize, and establish relationships between theoretical concepts. The data analysis revealed the emergence of three major categories and ten subcategories, which in turn formed the basis for a model explaining undergraduate students’ understanding of the environment.

The following chapter provides an extensive review of existing literature which supports the rationale for undertaking this research. Chapter Three details the research design in terms of the selection of a qualitative inquiry paradigm and grounded theory method, research procedures as well as ethical considerations and considerations for a transparent and trustworthy research process. Chapter Four discusses the emergent categories and subcategories, with detailed descriptions of their properties and dimensions. In Chapter Five, a model for undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment is presented and key findings are discussed in relation to this model and contextualized within the existing literature. The chapter concludes
with a discussion of the implications of the study for social work practice and education as well as implications for future research and limitations of the study.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The inclusion and placement of a literature review in a grounded theory study is both controversial and misunderstood. For that reason I will clarify the intent and function. Based on the original method of grounded theory by Glaser and Strauss, there is a common belief that the literature review must be suspended until after the study is complete so as to avoid tainting the outcome of the grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue that a researcher should enter the study as a tabula rasa and should not be influenced by earlier studies. However, many grounded theorists do not agree with this view (Charmaz, 2014; Dunne, 2011; Thornberg, 2012).

Progressively, grounded theorists know it is likely a researcher will have familiarity with relevant literature as the researcher typically has knowledge about a topic area before deciding to conduct research. In addition, a literature review is often expected for research proposals, theses and dissertations, and ethics approval (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014).

The literature review in a grounded theory study should demonstrate knowledge of relevant works by identifying and discussing the most noteworthy ideas and making connections between the researcher’s study and earlier studies, as well as permitting the researcher to make claims from grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). Overall, “completing a thorough, sharply focused literature review strengthens your argument – and your credibility” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 308). Thus, I adhere to Charmaz’s view of the importance of conducting a literature review prior to the start of my research study.

This literature review includes a brief history of the progression of PIE in the social work profession, including alternative viewpoints and models of the environment
in social work practice. A main focus is on the development of environmental social work, identifying core themes in the literature as well as key studies in this area. The chapter concludes with a review of current literature as it pertains to social work and the environment.

**PIE in Social Work Practice**

From its inception social work professed its uniqueness by focusing on the relationship between the person and the environment. The PIE perspective evolved over decades and contributed to both establishing social work as a profession and creating a common organizing practice framework (Besthorn, 2013; CASW, 2008). Within the PIE perspective, environment has come to mean the social environment. The CASW (2008) *Social Work Scope of Practice* states, “A basic goal of social work is to facilitate the ‘social well-being’ and ‘social functioning’ of the ‘person-in-environment’” (p. 2). While PIE has contributed to the integration of various levels of practice (casework, group work, organizational and community work), empowerment of the individual and society, and construction of a relatively unified profession (Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2010), it is necessary to broaden social work’s scope of practice. According to Besthorn and Meyer (2010), the profession must think beyond helping one’s neighbourhood or even country and consider new ways of thinking about community. In order to confront and challenge larger global issues, social work must recognize that incorporating the environment involves a new understanding of how humans and non-humans are connected to each other (Zapf, 2010).

At present, PIE is increasingly being criticized for its narrow definition of environment (Besthorn, 2012, 2013; Coates & Gray, 2012; Green & McDermont, 2010;
Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2009, 2012; Zapf, 2009, 2010). Besthorn (2013), for example, states that PIE has remained unchallenged for the last 30 years. Conceptual problems of the framework have been identified, namely its narrow, uncritical, and apolitical view of the social environment (Besthorn, 2013). The transaction between person and environment has been clinical in nature focusing on individual behaviour within the social environment. This is problematic as it severely limits social work’s ability to “engage critically with structural barriers and constraints marginalizing and oppressing disenfranchised groups” (Besthorn, 2013, p. 188). A broader environmental perspective is required to respond to the impact the environment is having on the human population and vice versa. Green and McDermott (2010) purport that unifying the profession’s practice around PIE has been counterproductive. The authors argue that social work, fixated on creating consistency, is overlooking the diversity of its origins and relying on strategies “crafted along linear, cause-effect pathways in contrast to the holisms and interdependency of phenomena that person-in-environment was originally designed to capture” (Green & McDermott, 2010, p. 2419).

Not all critiques have been made without an alternative point of view. Norton (2012) calls for the reconfiguration of PIE to include the natural environment by creating an ecosocial perspective that recognizes the human-nature connection and the larger ecosystem. Integrating knowledge from ecologically focused disciplines, such as ecopsychology, ecofeminism and feminist psychology “can inspire greater empathy for all living things, promote sustainability and contribute to the well-being of the planet as a whole” (Norton, 2012, p. 306). An ecosocial approach advances the inclusion of
environmental sustainability in social work practice, whereby social workers are in a
better position to respond to the present-day environmental crisis.

Besthorn and Canda (2002) present a deep ecological perspective of the
environment that encompasses humans in their relationship with nature. Deep ecology
regards the environment as the inclusion of all human and non-human beings, processes,
things, and systems in the total planetary ecology. For the most part, discussions of
environment in social work education are from a human-centred shallow ecology,
thinking of the environment on a small scale and only for human benefit (Besthorn &
Canada, 2002). Deep ecology promotes person and environment as mutually inclusive,
because people cannot exist without environment. Therefore, the continued destruction
of nature will continue to rebound back on humans, “thus locking people into a cycle of
harm and oppression for both humans and nonhumans” (Besthorn & Canda, 2002, p. 95).
This ideology argues that social work needs to undergo a fundamental reorientation of its
perspective about environment, from being in environment to being with nature.

Zapf (2010) suggests that PIE be retired and replaced with a more suitable term
that creates awareness of how the environment affects people. The term people as place
conveys unity and holism that brings us immediately to concerns of sustainability and
stewardship (Zapf, 2010). Thereby, “This idea of living well in place integrates social
justice with environmental justice, human rights with environmental rights, and human
responsibilities with environmental responsibilities” (Zapf, 2010, p. 40). From this
perspective, individuals learn that they are part of the earth system and that the choices
they make affect the planet as well as the larger human population. Zapf (2010)
acknowledges that the generation of social workers who built social work practice with
PIE did not face the current environmental crisis and the modern-day threats to human existence that are now recognized. However, these models “are no longer adequate for coping with the challenges faced by today’s societies and the planet itself” (Zapf, 2009, p. 194). It will be up to future generations of social workers to adapt practice to include environment.

In her 2012 book *Green Social Work: From Environmental Crises to Environmental Justice*, Lena Dominelli explains her concept of green social work. Recognizing that social work has engaged in environmental issues in a limited manner, Dominelli (2012) argues that social work’s response to environmental crises “must both challenge and address poverty, structural inequalities, socio-economic disparities, industrialization processes, consumption patterns, diverse contexts, global interdependencies and limited natural resources” (p. 3). Green social work is defined as: part of practice that intervenes to protect the environment and enhance people’s well-being by integrating the interdependencies between people and their socio-cultural, economic and physical environments, and among peoples within an egalitarian framework that addresses prevailing structural inequalities and unequal distribution of power and resources (Dominelli, 2012, p. 8).

Dominelli (2012) seeks to make the relationship between people and their environment more interdependent and symbiotic. She claims that people have the right to be cared for and by each other and the biosphere.

While these positions emphasize the need for a shift in PIE, the physical environment has not always been absent from social work theory and models. A few social work pioneers began acknowledging ecological decline and its disastrous effect on
the human population in the 1980s. For example, Germain and Gitterman (1980), incorporated ideas from the field of ecology to develop ecological social work, which strives to demonstrate social work’s dual responsibility to both person and environment. This work generates awareness that human well-being depends on both the social and physical aspects of the environment and thus assessments must be completed accordingly. Applying the tenets of ecological social work, Soine (1987) draws attention to environmental hazards, such as toxic chemicals, pollution, and workplace dangers, that are contributing to or causing a threat to the welfare of society. With this cognizance, Soine contends that the physical environment should be a critical factor in social work assessment and practice. Hoff and Polack (1993) denote the environmental crisis as “a major public policy issue influencing prospects for global peace and human development” (p. 204). They emphasize the need for an ecological model of social work practice, asserting that the profession’s concern for the disadvantaged, along with its theoretical base and practice skills is a natural progression in response to environmental issues. Berger and Kelly (1993) declare that the human population faces a series of difficult challenges - economic, geographic displacement, and adverse changes in health - as a result of the human-induced changes to the biosphere. Urging recognition for the necessity of new social work ethics and values that will evolve into an awareness of human connectedness to nature, the authors developed a 12-point Ecological Credo for Social Workers. Finally, Hoff and McNutt (1994) provide an edited collection entitled The Global Environmental Crisis: Implications for Social Welfare and Social Work that explicitly garners attention to the idea that social work cannot fully recognize its ethical responsibilities without understanding the link between human well-being and the well-
being of the planet. In fact, an overwhelming theme in the above-mentioned sources is the need for social work to include the physical environment and its impact in practice in order to fulfill its professional obligations.

**Core Themes in Environmental Social Work**

Within the last 15 years, a growing core of social workers has recognized the importance of incorporating environmental awareness into social work theories and practice (Besthorn, 2003, 2004, 2012, 2013; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Besthorn & Meyer, 2010; Coates, 2003, 2004, 2005, Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; 2014; Hawkins, 2010; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Jones, 2013; Kemp, 2011; Miller et al., 2012; Norton, 2009; 2012; Schmitz, Matyok, Sloan, & James, 2012; Tester, 2013; van Wormer et al., 2011; Zapf, 2009, 2010). This increase in scholarly literature has focused on the natural environment and social work practice. An overview of this literature can be grouped into eight broad themes.

First, social work has been late to identify the environmental crisis, its impact on human and planetary well-being, as well as, the role for social work practice (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2005; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2014; Miller et al., 2012). This is problematic because “environmental crises generate socio-economic and cultural inequalities rooted in environmental injustices that exacerbate those already existing in socio-economic, political and cultural structures” (Dominelli, 2014, p. 338). The challenge for current and future social workers is to “better understand and respond to the many dimensions of climate change and environmental destruction” (Coates & Gray, 2012, p. 231). Social workers must expand their theoretical considerations and practice
interventions to include the physical environment as a central theme in social work discourse.

Second, as human welfare is undeniably connected to the welfare of the entire planet, social work must extend its person-in-environment framework to include the physical environment, both natural and built, in practice (Besthorn, 2013; Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2012, Zapf, 2009, 2010). Social work’s shallow and predominantly social interpretation of PIE has “resulted in many academics being ill-equipped for the relevance and connection between social work and environmental issues. This has contributed to the profession, overall, being quite reluctant to fully accept the importance of environmental issues for social work” (Coates & Gray, 2012, p. 231). Presently, social work does not know how environmental concerns fit within the profession or how to integrate them. Several social workers, as discussed previously, are appealing for a reconfiguration of the ‘person-in-environment’ construct to include the natural world (Besthorn, 2003, 2013; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2009, 2010).

Central to the above is the third theme of interconnectedness. According to the literature, humans have lost the connection between themselves and to the environment and to remedy the escalating environmental crisis this connection must be restored (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Coates, 2003, 2005; Coates et al., 2006; Lysack 2009, 2010a). Lysack (2010b) argues that individuals must feel connected and have a sense of attachment to the environment to protect it. When the environment is affected the health and vitality of people and communities is also affected (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003). As social work continues to focus on issues such as poverty, discrimination, oppression, and social injustices, it must begin to take a more active role in environmental issues. Social
work must work to improve quality of life by improving the quality of the environment making “a more overt connection between the environment, human survival, and human happiness” (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003, p. 13). Several researchers indicate that bridging this connection starts with the evaluation of individual personal attachment to the environment (Coates, 2003, Coates et al., 2006, Lysack 2009, 2010a).

Fourth, the environmental crisis, including the effects of climate change, has been recognized as a human rights issue that disproportionately affects those who are vulnerable and marginalized (Hawkins, 2010; Tester, 2013; UNHRC, 2009). Environmental degradation, poverty and war are inextricably linked with the human and social dimensions of human rights and social justice (Schmitz et al., 2012). Increasingly, human rights are being recognized as including human survival, including access to food, water, shelter, and health (Tester, 2013) and Coates (2005) purports there are “strong links between environmental destruction and pollution, health problems, racism and poverty” (p. 37). For instance, weather-related disasters have had a devastating effect on people and their enjoyment of life, particularly in the developing world. Between 1994 and 2015 there were 6,873 natural disasters worldwide, resulting in 1.35 million deaths and a further 218 million people affected (Centre for Research on the Epidemiology for Disasters [CRED], 2015). Therefore, as a profession based on human rights and social justice, social work must become involved in environmental issues if it is to fulfill its ethical responsibilities (Hawkins, 2010; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Muldoon, 2006; Tester, 2013).

The fifth theme indicates that the definition of social justice should be altered to recognize the effect environmental issues are having on human rights and social justice
issues (Besthorn, 2012; Coates, 2004; Miller et al., 2012). To be relevant in the contemporary world, social work must move beyond the traditional focus on social and economic justice to include environmental justice (Hawkins, 2010). Environmental justice extends the human rights focus of social justice to concerns about a larger version of the environment and hones in on those people most affected by environmental degradation (Miller et al., 2012). Social work has an important role in developing and sustaining a concept of environmental justice focusing on the risks and needs of humans in the context of the physical environment (Dominelli, 2014; Miller et al., 2012).

Theme six states that the environmental crisis stems from the dominant Western worldview of modernity which contends that nature exists for human benefit. Mainstream Western ways of thinking focusing on the individual and independence as well as economic growth have led to a competitive process of exploiting the Earth (Coates & Gray, 2012). By not questioning these values and ideals, social work has allied itself with these standards, thus promoting continued exploitation of humans and the environment (Coates, 2003, 2005; Besthorn, 2004; Tester, 2013, van Wormer et al., 2007). Lacking a deeper, more inclusive framework, social work has failed to see that it is the values of modernism that are perpetuating inequality among individuals and destruction of the environment (Coates, 2004).

Subsequently, theme seven recognizes that some social workers are appealing for nothing short of a radical revolution in social work values, beliefs, and ethics where “the profession’s primary responsibility is to contribute to a transformation of human consciousness away from its embedded anthropocentric biases toward a new, ecocentric orientation” (Besthorn, 2014). Different ways of knowing, such as ecofeminism, deep
ecology, and Indigenous perspectives, along with nonlinear thinking, emotional intelligence, spirituality, and engagement with the non-human world are vital to completely understanding the human/nature relationship (Besthorn, 2003, 2012, 2014; Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Coates & Gray, 2012; Coates et al., 2006; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2009). These viewpoints focus on the interconnectedness between all species, human and non-human, and the planet, with none more important than the other. Alternative perspectives allow social work to move beyond the constraints of individualism, dualism, and anthropocentrism to a more effective position that will create effective and beneficial change, not only for humans but the environment as well (Coates et al., 2006).

Lastly, the eighth theme discusses growing recognition that for social work to fully participate and contribute to the current environmental crisis it is necessary for the profession to operate within an interdisciplinary framework. With core knowledge and skills in the areas of collaboration, networking, advocacy, community development, and direct work with marginalized individuals and communities, social work can play a key role working in partnership with other disciplines committed to environmental justice (Besthorn, 2014; Coates & Gray, 2012; Norton, 2009; Schmitz et al., 2012). Since there has been little social work scholarship in the area of the environment, social workers concerned with this area have had to be interdisciplinary in their search for information (Coates & Gray, 2012). As well, Coates and Gray (2012) believe that social workers must work together or at least in unison with other professions, “to better understand and respond to the many dimensions of climate change and environmental destruction” (p. 231).
Despite the significance of these assertions, the majority of the literature is theoretical and conceptual in nature. In her review of environmental social work literature, Molyneux (2010), found it “lacked pragmatic suggestions on how to apply environmental or ecosocial work in practice and few studies appeared to have explored its practical realities” (p. 61). Even social workers writing about this topic concede that the next task for environmental social work is to determine what practitioners are actually doing in regards to practice (Besthorn, 2014; Coates & Gray, 2012). Although these authors write with vigour about the importance of environment in the field of social work, few empirical studies in this area exist.

**What the Research Reveals**

In 2001, Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) conducted a preliminary study of 113 social workers in New Mexico, United States, and KwaAhlu Natat, South Africa, via a mailed questionnaire. The purpose of the study was to examine if and how social workers in both countries incorporated the physical and biological environment into their practice. The results showed a majority of the respondents (71%) thought environmental issues were relevant to social work practice. Although approaches to practice differed in the two geographical areas, 46% of the respondents reported actually incorporating environmental issues into their practice. Given the findings, the study called for additional research to determine the nature and extent that social work schools are incorporating environmental education into their curricula. Marlow and Van Rooyen (2001) stress that social workers are more likely to incorporate the environment into their practice if they have been provided with an educational foundation.
Shaw (2006) completed a cross-sectional survey using a geographically based random sample of members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in the United States. One thousand members were randomly selected from California to complete a survey instrument containing a broad range of questions related to the natural environment. The purpose of the study was to explore social work knowledge and attitudes towards the ecological environment. The findings suggest that social workers are no more or less environmentally friendly than the general population. However, it was determined that social work could have a leading role in addressing inadequate social policies by incorporating environmental issues into social work practice and advocating for vulnerable populations. Furthermore, the findings suggest a need to discuss environmental issues in social work curriculum. Of the 373 respondents 90.08% indicated they believed issues related to social work and the natural environment should be discussed in schools of social work. Shaw (2006) concludes from the study results that the population he studied believes incorporating environmental issues into social work education is important but lacking.

In an attempt to uncover the opinions, awareness, and understanding of social workers regarding environmental destruction and importance to practice, Manijeh Moghis, a MSW student, conducted a qualitative research graduate project (2011). Eight social workers from Kingston, Ontario were interviewed to explore whether participants perceived a relationship between environmental destruction and social work as well as to assess its impact on their social work practice (Moghis, 2011). The participants held varied views about the importance of the environment to social work. Some interviewees expressed that the environment was important at the professional
level while others stated the environment was “important at a personal level, but not a professional level” (Moghisi, 2011, p. 80). Overall, the findings suggest the participants thought that an environmental crisis existed and they expressed feeling overwhelmed about the situation (Moghisi, 2011). Study participants reported that offering social work students courses and workshops regarding the environment would be useful for increasing awareness. Moghisi (2011) concludes that social work education can take small steps to raise social workers’ consciousness about the environmental crisis and how it affects people and nature as a whole.

Another study by Tischler (2011) focuses only on climate change. Eleven social workers from the northeast United States were interviewed in this qualitative exploratory study to establish whether social workers could see a connection between climate change adaptation and social work practice. The participants were all women between the ages of 29 and 80 with MSW degrees. To be chosen for the study, participants had to believe human behaviour was a cause of global climate change. The study participants expressed concerns they had for their communities and clients related to climate change and identified action social workers could take to help clients and communities adapt (Tischler, 2011).

Burns (2012) approached social work educators to explore the importance and level of inclusion given to the natural environment in Canadian social work university courses. Burns (2012) used a concurrent, mixed method cross-sectional online survey design that targeted 568 social work educators from 29 Canadian social work programs with a response rate of 23% (121). The findings highlight the need for the addition of the natural environment in social work courses. Seventy-seven percent of participants
assigned a high level of importance to expanding social work practice frameworks and paradigms in ways that would allow consideration of the natural environment. However, educators were not sure how to integrate environmental material into their courses and had a lack of knowledge about the topic. Burns (2012) states that the study demonstrates, “that there is a will to bring about a necessary paradigmatic shift in Canadian social work education” (p. 128).

A study conducted in the United States explored how social work educators in that country introduced issues of the natural environment relevant to social work into teaching (Hudson, 2014). Sixteen social work educators were interviewed in this qualitative study using naturalistic inquiry. Only participants who already understood environmental social work issues were chosen. Participants either had to have published research on the implications of the natural environment for social work or included issues around the natural environment in their teaching. The study identifies three key findings: 1) a connection between the quality of the participants’ personal relationships with nature and the approach they described as appropriate for social work and the natural environment; 2) despite the fact that there is little information in the social work research and literature on ecological justice, approximately 80 percent of the participants in the study introduced ecological justice into their teaching; and 3) participants believed that the existence of both the NASW Environment Policy and the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) educational standards had created a structural barrier to introducing issues of the natural environment into their teaching (Hudson, 2014).

Prominent factors about these studies are that the research participants were either social workers or social work educators and, second, most of the research was
conducted by social work students, fulfilling the requirements of either a Master’s thesis or doctoral dissertation. Another point to highlight is that for at least two of the studies, inclusion criteria for research participants required that the participants have knowledge about how environmental issues affect individuals. Overall, the implication of these studies indicates that the environment should be incorporated in social work education and curriculum. However, the studies do not include the perspective of undergraduate social work students nor if they are being educated on the environment.

**Present-day Environmental Social Work**

In keeping with grounded theory method, I returned to the literature after data collection and analyses were completed. This literature review revealed minimal new understanding; however, there has been some development. While there are still conceptual ideologies in the literature, endeavours have been made to include environment in social work curriculum and bring a focus on environmental justice to social work practice with several scholarly publications on the application of environmental social work (Drolet, Wu, Taylor, & Dennehy, 2015; Harris & Boddy, 2017; Lysack, 2015; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015; Miller & Hayward, 2014; Philip & Reisch, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Several other insights were gained. First, some inroads have been made at integrating the environment into social work curriculum. At the University of Calgary in Edmonton, Alberta, a new undergraduate social work class entitled Social Work and Sustainable Social Development was taught in 2014. Teaching methods such as mind maps, case studies, and guest speakers, were used to integrate social, economic, and environmental dimensions into social work practice and policy (Drolet, et al., 2015). Recognizing the growing importance of sustainability,
environmental justice, and green social work, the course provided students “with an in-depth understanding of the complexity inherent in shaping effective responses to social, economic and environmental crises” (Drolet et al., 2015, p. 540). This is an encouraging step forward, although including the words ‘sustainable social development’ in the title perhaps makes it difficult to recognize that the focus of the class is on the environment.

Other attempts at integrating the environment in social work curriculum include Kaiser, Himmelheber, Miller, and Hayward (2015) using food justice as a lens for undergraduate and graduate students to learn about environmental justice issues and application for future practice. Through a variety of social work courses, units, and assignments, the focus was on educating students about food and environmental justice issues. For example, one author created a social work course where students learned about the ideas of environmental and ecological justice with food justice being an anchoring point. This class used a transdisciplinary approach, collaborating with instructors from two other departments, horticulture and food and nutrition, to offer an after-school garden program at a public elementary school (Kaiser, Himmelheber, Miller & Hayward, 2015).

In Australia, a rurally located social work course team amended the field education curriculum to include Environment and Sustainability as part of its learning goals for BSW and MSW students (Crawford et al., 2015). In order to evaluate how students and field supervisors experienced the addition of this learning area, a survey drawing on a constructivist methodological approach was administered electronically to all students from the Bachelor’s and Master’s degree programs completing first or second placements (n = 37) and all field supervisors (n = 39) with a response rate of
48.9% for students and 56.4% for supervisors (Crawford et al., 2015). Overall, the students and supervisors recognized the importance of environmental issues but had difficulty in understanding the relevance to social work practice. This being said, answers to open-ended questions indicated that incorporating environmental sustainability into social work practice is a plausible goal to strive for (Crawford et al., 2015). This outcome highlights that future social work practitioners are interested in the environment but require the necessary education if they are to include this topic in their scope of practice.

Asserting that environmental justice is mostly studied in developed countries and ignores the injustices occurring in international contexts, Willet, (2015), using a phenomenological and ethnographic approach, aimed to address this gap in Jam City, a poor community in Nairobi, Kenya. Willet (2015) demonstrates that using an environmental justice framework “is important to build a worldwide movement for environmental fairness and structural equality” (p. 569) proving that the principles of environmental justice hold true in international settings. Willet (2015) argues that environmental justice needs to be more readily included in social work curriculum. Also recognizing the importance of environmental justice, Nesmith and Smyth (2015) completed a quantitative study in the Midwestern United States. Including BSW and MSW degree programs, 1,197 state-licensed social workers were emailed a survey listing 10 environmental hazards. Respondents were asked to identify which, if any of the environmental hazards, were most critical for their clients. There was a response rate of 31% or 373 respondents. The study found that practicing social workers encounter clients who have been exposed to environmental hazards, but as social workers have
little education to help them fully understand the effects of these environmental issues (Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). The authors conclude that social workers want to see environmental justice integrated into social work education so that graduates entering the profession are better prepared to deal with these issues.

A quantitative study in the United States distributed the New Environmental Paradigm (NEP) scale to a total of 610 MSW and 238 BSW students at two universities to determine students’ attitudes and beliefs about environmental social work (Miller & Hayward, 2015). They had a response rate of 24%. Overall, the students were interested in enhancing the amount and scope of exposure to environmental issues in the social work curriculum. Miller and Hayward (2015) go on to discuss how the environment could be incorporated in the curriculum such as by expanding policy classes to focus on local and global environmental policy. The latter two studies are qualitative and did not have a large response rate. However, each shows an interest in including the environment in social work practice, both for practicing and future social workers. As stated by Nesmith and Smith (2015), “the energy and drive to create change is already present among current social workers” (p. 499). Similar to earlier studies, the outcomes support encouraging social workers to become more involved in promoting environmental justice by including this topic in curriculum, research, and practice.

Harris and Boddy (2015) contributed to the literature by undertaking a content analysis of Australian social work courses. Using 937 subject descriptions within BSW and MSW degree programs, the study found, unsurprisingly, a lack of content regarding the natural environment in social work curriculum. The authors identify a number of barriers that are stopping educators from incorporating the environment into the social
work curriculum when the need has already been identified (Harris & Boddy, 2015). These include: institutions being unable to keep pace with rapid curriculum renewal, accreditation guidelines and standards constraining curriculum development, and dominant neo-liberal ideology (Harris & Boddy, 2015). However, the authors maintain that these barriers are not insurmountable and that efforts should be made to include the natural environment in the curriculum.

A portion of the more recent literature remains theoretical in nature. A conceptual paper by Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) entitled Transforming Social Work Curricula: Institutional Supports for Promoting Sustainability asserts that major shifts in world politics, national economies, and social and emotional climates have changed the context in which social work operates. This shift has consequences for the people social workers serve. Therefore, a transformation of the social work curriculum and field practice is needed (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). An argument is made that institutional support, meaning support from universities or other such establishments can play a pivotal role in the options and opportunities for environment and sustainability content in social work curriculum. This support consists of: (1) institutional commitment and culture, (2) curricular supports and guidelines, and (3) interdisciplinary faculty development (Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015). By having environment and sustainability promoted from, and at the institutional level, Melekis and Woodhouse (2015) maintain that “institutional supports strengthen the potential for an effective personal response to the current emergency in our natural and social environment” (p. 583).

In another academic paper, Teixeira and Krings (2015) apply the global social work paradigm developed by the IFSW and the International Association of Schools of
Social Work (IASSW) to outline how social work educators can include environmental justice content in social work education and training while using existing social work values, skills, and perspectives. The article highlights that any current social work program can adapt its curriculum to ensure social work students understand that environmental justice is social justice. Practical ways to infuse environmental justice in the training and education of social workers to prepare them with the skills to respond to the ever-increasing environmental crisis were included (Teixeira & Krings, 2015). For example, students can be encouraged to pay attention to the role of the natural and built environment in therapeutic interventions.

Ramsay and Boddy (2017) attempt to clarify and understand the role of the environment in social work practice. They use a concept analysis framework to identify the attributes and characteristics of environmental social work, develop an operational definition of environmental social work, and provide a case study to illustrate the practice of environmental social work. The term environmental social work was chosen for this analysis because it was the most widely used term in the literature. After reviewing 117 articles published after 2010 to reflect current ideas, Ramsay and Boddy establish that environmental social work differs from other social work areas because it places the ecosystem at the centre of the practice rather than a person (2017). While divergences are present, overall environmental social work “is focused on helping humanity create and maintain a biodiverse planetary ecosystem which includes humans” (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017, p. 82). Having a clear definition of environmental social work can be used to develop and solidify this topic in mainstream social work practice as well as in its practical implementation.
Gray and Coates weigh in on the topic again presenting ideas for the
development of social work curriculum that includes the environment, stating that a
fundamental rethinking of the humanistic values and theories attributed to social work is
needed. Perspective transformation, occurring when core values are challenged and
long-held beliefs no longer seem to fit, can help create conditions that support a shift in
social work perspectives (Gray & Coates, 2015). For example, a greater
acknowledgment of climate change and environmental destruction can contribute to a
gradual perspective transformation. This acknowledgement raises critical questions
about the core values of Western society, influencing social work education to include a
more holistic approach to the environment (Gray & Coates, 2015). While these articles
are conceptual in nature, a limitation identified in earlier literature, they do contribute to
the foundational basis for including environment in social work practice.

Emerging in the literature are concrete examples of how to incorporate the
environment in social work practice. Philip and Reisch (2015) use a case study of local
environmental justice to demonstrate how social workers can use their knowledge and
skills to make important contributions to environmental justice and sustainability. Greg
Sawtell, a social worker in Baltimore, United States, joined forces with a group of local
high school students who initiated a campaign to block construction of the largest waste-
to-energy incinerator in the United States. The incinerator was to be built in the Curtis
Bay neighbourhood of Baltimore, which is already plagued by toxic facilities, including
a medical waste incinerator, chemical plants, fuel depots, and a 200-acre coal pier (Philip
& Reisch, 2015). The group raised awareness and educated community members on the
dangers and risks associated with living in close proximity to a large incinerator. As a
result, the project was delayed. This success shows how social workers can be involved in advocating for a marginalized population. Despite this success, Philip and Reisch (2015) acknowledge that overall social work has not been involved in promoting environmental justice or greater understanding of the issues contributing to the environmental crisis.

Mishka Lysack, (2015) an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Social Work at the University of Calgary specializing in public policy on climate change, energy, and environmental protection, also sits as the chairperson of the Coal Phase-out Network in Alberta. Noting that the literature has already called on social work to be involved in environmental issues and that the profession has the necessary skills and knowledge to do so, Lysack (2015) discusses social work practices for effectively influencing policy using his participation in the Coal Phase-out Network as a case study. The network of health and environmental non-governmental organizations banded together to develop policy changes for phasing out coal in Alberta. Lysack identifies the following social work practices as key when working on environmental issues: building relationships, communication, advocacy, and a history of policy research in areas of public concern as well as working as part of an inter-disciplinary team (2015). This is a tangible example of how a social worker has the ability to work towards environmental justice.

This secondary literature review highlights the ongoing impact of the environmental crisis and social work’s lack of involvement in this issue. Progressing past theoretical concepts, action has been taken to include the topic of the physical and natural environment in the social work curriculum and a clearer argument has been made for the inclusion of environmental justice in both curriculum and practice. The studies
reveal that for the most part, future and practicing social workers are interested in learning more about the environment and including it as part of their practice. While these are positive findings, there is agreement that more still needs to be done.

**Summary**

This literature review examined the current PIE construct, which focuses mostly on the social environment. An increasing number of social workers are critiquing this restricted view of PIE and making a case for including the physical environment to reflect the impact of the growing environmental crisis. The literature includes alternative perspectives to PIE along with an examination of some initial inclusions of the physical environment in social work concepts. An overview of the conceptual and theoretical environmental social work literature was followed by a discussion of the empirical studies in this area. Present-day environmental literature places greater focus on the advancement of the environment in social work practice, with courses being created to include the environment in social work curriculum and an emphasis on environmental justice. However, further work needs to be done to include the environment in social work curriculum and practice. Therefore, it is important to establish what undergraduate social work students know about the environment as well as if and how they are being educated about the environment. Given that this is an emerging area, an exploratory qualitative research design is well suited for this purpose. This study fills a gap in the current literature by providing an understanding of undergraduate social work students’ perception of the environment and what it will mean for their future social work practice. The chosen methodology to conduct this study is outlined in *Chapter Three.*
Chapter Three: Methodology

The design of this study involved selection of an appropriate inquiry paradigm and research method as well as careful consideration of a transparent research process. This chapter begins with a discussion of the rationale for using a qualitative design. It proceeds to discuss grounded theory as the chosen qualitative research method, more specifically constructivist grounded theory, and provides a rationale for using this methodological approach. The chapter continues with a presentation of ethical considerations, describing the simultaneous processes of data collection and analysis, and outlines measures taken to ensure trustworthiness.

Qualitative Research Inquiry

Qualitative research inquiry aims to answer questions about the what, why, and how of a phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2009) and involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). A qualitative approach to research should be used when it is the most appropriate method for carrying out the aim of the research study and is most commonly used when a problem or issue needs to be explored (Creswell, 2013). It allows researchers to understand the perspectives of participants and explore the meaning they give to a phenomenon (Green & Thorogood, 2009). It also gives voice to individuals and minimizes the power relationship between participant and researcher (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative research focuses on rich, thick description with an emphasis on process. In addition, theories can be developed using qualitative methods when existing theories are inadequate, do not exist, or do not adequately capture the complexity of the problem (Creswell, 2013).

According to Denzin and Lincoln (2017), the qualitative research process consists of three interconnected and generic activities, which are ontology, epistemology,
and methodology, although they can be labelled in a variety of ways. These terms refer to the nature of reality (ontology), the relationship between the inquirer and the known (epistemology), and how knowledge is gained (methodology). The researcher’s epistemological, ontological, and methodological viewpoints make up what is termed an interpretive framework, a basic set of beliefs that guides action (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). All research is interpretive, meaning that it is guided by a set of beliefs and feelings about the world and how it should be understood and studied. It is fundamental for the researcher to identify their perspectives and worldview as these beliefs underpin and shape the research study and findings (Green & Thorogood, 2009). A qualitative research inquiry consists of several common characteristics. They are: collecting data in a natural setting, using multiple methods to gather data, organizing data into categories or themes, using complex reasoning to build patterns categories and themes, positioning the researcher in the study, using the researcher as a key instrument in the process, focusing on participants’ meaning, and using an emergent research design (Creswell, 2013).

The problem being explored in this study is social work students’ understanding of the environment, the relevance of the environment to the profession, and what the environment will mean for them in their future practice. Upon reviewing the literature it appears that, while a persuasive case has been made for the inclusion of the physical environment in social work, there has been little research to support this claim. Moreover, the completed studies focus on practicing social workers or social work educators. Studies, for the most part, have not concentrated on undergraduate social work students, whose perspective can contribute to the area of environmental social
work. The focus of this study was to understand how undergraduate social work students in Saskatchewan learn about environmental issues and how they may apply this knowledge to their future social work practice given that there is little to no formal inclusion of this area in their curriculum. It is for this reason that a qualitative research approach was best suited for this study.

**Researcher’s Perspective**

According to Creswell (2013), the research process begins with the researcher’s consideration of what they bring to the study, such as their personal history and views of themselves and others. In addition, acknowledging personal values and philosophical assumptions contributes to making the research process transparent and demonstrates trustworthiness (Creswell, 2013; Green & Thorogood, 2009). The researcher’s perspective influences how a study is formulated and designed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). It shapes the problem, research question, and how information is gathered to answer the question. As well, knowing how the researcher stands on issues of epistemology is helpful in evaluating the final research study (Creswell, 2013).

For this study, I adopted a constructivist interpretive framework, also called social constructivism. Using this framework I assumed a relativist ontology, meaning there are multiples realities, a subjectivist epistemology, meaning that the researcher and participant co-create understandings, and aimed for a naturalistic set of methodological procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017). As a researcher I did not strive to establish objective facts about the social world since such objectivity is impossible to obtain. Instead I attempted to explain how the research participants understood, or made sense of, their lived experience. Also, any theory I arrived at is my interpretation of the
research participants’ understanding and not simply a reflection of them (Charmaz, 2014). My selection of a constructivist framework was guided by the goals of my research and the reason why the inquiry was conducted. Within this framework I attempted to gain increased knowledge about my study and participants by interpreting how they perceive and interact within a social context. I wanted the participants to have an active role in the research process, presenting their views along with my material. Using this framework also identifies gaps between theory and practice (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

The researcher’s acknowledgement of the impact that their biography has on the research process is as important as the explicit statement of methodological orientation. Creswell (2013) points out that reflection of the influence of self not only creates personal awareness of how the research is shaped by one’s own biography but also provides a context within which awareness can more fully understand the researcher’s interpretation of the data. The qualitative researcher is a key instrument in the research process, personally collecting data and guiding the work that will be done in the study (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2017).

Throughout the research I reflected on my background and knowledge and its potential impact on my study. I was aware that my interest in the research area did not happen by chance but stemmed from my previous research in the topic area and personal interest. In fact, it was my interest in the topic area that influenced my decision to undertake this study. Ongoing self-reflection further helped me recognize the impact of my personal attributes on the research process. As stated, I have a large interest in environmental social work and have a pre-existing knowledge base. I needed to be
conscious of this previous knowledge and ensure that I was not expecting certain
answers or thoughts from the participants. I had to be mindful to go where the data took
me and not to make the research fit the literature. This included not being dismissive of
participants’ ideas based on what I knew from the literature and being open-minded to
their understanding of the environment.

Keeping in mind my beliefs, perspectives, and values, I chose a research
methodology that aligns with these views, as well as, one that was the best fit to address
the research question and the aim of the study. Thus, I chose grounded theory as my
research methodology.

**Grounded Theory**

Grounded theory is the study of a phenomena for the purpose of generating or
discovering a theory derived from the data (Charmaz, 2014; Glasser & Strauss, 1967).
Grounded theory explains human interaction and aims to understand what is going on in
a given time. The theory is developed through systematic data collection and analysis
pertaining to the phenomena which is referred to as constant comparative analysis
(Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This process identifies categories, later developed into
concepts, to explain the theory emerging from the data. It is a continuous cycle that is
repeated until it is possible to describe the phenomenon being researched. The stopping
point is reached when new data does not change this emerging theory. This is called
theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The final product of a grounded theory
study is a grounded theory generated by the researcher and explaining a process or
scheme associated with the phenomenon being studied (Birks & Mills, 2015).
When beginning a grounded theory study, the researcher should: identify an area of interest, avoid pre-conceived theories, and focus on the data (Glasser & Strauss 1967). The research question should be stated in broad terms and, depending on what the data reveals, can change over the course of the study. Grounded theory differs from other research methods because it develops out of a broad topic or research question and lets the theory emerge from the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). This is opposed to most other scientific inquiries where the hypothesis is already stated and data is collected that either proves or disproves the research question. Grounded theory provides guidelines and describes steps on how to conduct a research study (Charmaz, 2014). These guidelines exist to assist the researcher, although a key feature of grounded theory is flexibility. From its inception, Glasser and Strauss (1967) encouraged researchers to use grounded theory strategies flexibly in their own way. It is acceptable to adapt and modify grounded theory to solve varied problems and conduct diverse studies. For example, the tenets can be applied to lead to full theory development or they may be used to only complete a specific task, such as identifying major concepts (Charmaz, 2014).

Ultimately the researcher needs to be aware of the aim of the study and to ensuring that the strategies used to address the topic area relate to the study. This is important for methodological congruence and a credible research study (Birks & Mills, 2015). To understand this methodology further a background on the development of grounded theory is presented.

**Development of grounded theory.** Grounded theory was developed by two sociologists, Anselm Strauss and Barney Glaser, in the 1960s (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). It joined together two contrasting sociological traditions, positivism and pragmatism.
Glaser studied at Columbia University, gaining a theoretical background in positivism and being influenced by the teachings of Paul Lazarsfeld, a leader in quantitative methods. Glaser used this influence to design grounded theory and provide a structured approach that uses rigorous analytical guidelines to code qualitative data (Charmaz, 2006). Strauss studied at the University of Chicago, which has a strong tradition in qualitative research. He was influenced by pragmatism and the development of symbolic interactionism (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory was established at a time when the positivist paradigm was underlying the philosophical approach of traditional researchers in physical and social sciences (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The positivist paradigm emphasizes that there is one complete truth that can be found by using deductive reasoning to generate research hypotheses (Hall, Griffiths, & McKenna, 2013). Glaser and Strauss (1967) challenged this positivist paradigm and proposed that, with the use of systematic methods, qualitative inquiry could move beyond descriptive studies and develop theoretical explanations regarding human behaviour. Even though these two researchers had different philosophical and research backgrounds, they were able to “move qualitative inquiry beyond descriptive studies into the realm of explanatory theoretical frameworks, thereby providing abstract, conceptual understandings of the studied phenomena” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 6). As a result, grounded theory gained significant momentum in the last half of the twentieth century, inspiring new generations of social science researchers and gaining acceptance from qualitative researchers using a mixed methods approach (Charmaz, 2014).
Despite their success at developing grounded theory, a methodological split occurred between the two researchers (Charmaz, 2014; Hall et al., 2013). Glaser continued his work with grounded theory that aligned with his original approach, focusing more on methods than any theoretical underpinnings in what is referred to as Glaserian grounded theory (GT) or Classic GT. This approach emphasizes the emergence of categories from the data and discovery of a tentative theory (Hall et al., 2013). The belief is that what emerges is devoid of bias or interpretation from the researcher and that the researcher is objective throughout the study. As well, the researcher looks for ‘true meaning’ and is warned against applying prior knowledge or completing an extensive literature review before the study takes place (Hall et al., 2013). Because the major emphasis is on objectivity, Classic GT has been placed in the post-positivist paradigm (Creswell, 2013, Charmaz, 2006). Post-positivism claims that true objectivity will never be obtained but it is possible to discover knowledge that is separate from our minds (Hall et al., 2013).

Strauss, who went on to collaborate with Juliet Corbin, modified grounded theory to reject the positivist view that theory is out there to be discovered. This approach is often called Straussian GT (Hall et al., 2013). While structure and systematic coding remain, Strauss and Corbin (1998) claim that reality is a product of interpretation and construction by the researcher. Analysis involves the interpretation of the researcher, who is actively involved and not separate from the study (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This approach also moved grounded theory to verification (Charmaz, 2006). Strauss and Corbin (1998) use this word to mean evaluating for trustworthiness and seeking support throughout the project. This is different from the finding truth meaning of verification
found in positivist learnings. Straussian GT continues to have some post-positivist views although there is a shift towards a more constructivist framework (Hall et al., 2013). However, it is Kathy Charmaz that first brought grounded theory into a constructivist paradigm (Hall et al., 2013).

Constructivist grounded theory preserves the inductive, comparative, emergent, and open-ended approach of Glaser and Strauss’s original method and aligns it with symbolic interactionism (Hall et al., 2013). According to Charmaz (2014), constructivist grounded theory highlights the flexibility of grounded theory but resists the mechanical applications. Charmaz (2014) chose the term constructivist to acknowledge subjectivity and the researcher’s involvement in the construction and interpretation of data. Charmaz (2006, 2014) maintains that neither data nor theories are discovered but that we are part of the world we study and the data we collect. Constructivist grounded theory takes into account the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions as part of the research reality (Charmaz, 2014). This approach negates the reasoning of an objective observer and expert, meaning that researchers must examine how their privileges and preconceptions may shape the analysis (Charmaz, 2014).

In summary, grounded theory has proven to be a credible approach to qualitative research. While there has been much discourse about the different approaches to grounded theory, i.e. Classic, Straussian, and constructivist, choosing one over the other does not make a research study more or less valid. As Birks and Mills (2015) state dividing grounded theory is not helpful and fails to account for the subtleties and differences in grounded theory research design. There are no right or wrong approaches to using grounded theory although methodologically there are differences that need to be
taken into account (Birks & Mill, 2015). A researcher should choose a grounded theory approach that answers the research question, resonates with philosophical values for knowledge development within their discipline, and fits with personal world-view, values, beliefs, and goals (Birks & Mills, 2015). For the purpose of this study, I adhered to constructivist grounded theory as put forward by Charmaz.

**Choosing constructivist grounded theory.** Grounded theory is often chosen as a methodology when the intent of the study area is to fill a gap in the research and to generate a theory that explains a phenomenon (Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theory is designed to help the researcher learn from participants about how to understand a situation or process and aims to move the analytical process beyond simple description (Birks & Mills, 2015). It is recommended for a novice researcher because it provides specific guidelines for systematically collecting and analyzing the data to build an emergent theoretical framework (Charmaz, 2014). For my study, there was a lack of data-based insight into undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment in social work practice. I was interested in developing a rich, thick description of the participants’ views. Therefore, grounded theory was a good fit in developing a knowledge base in this area. As a novice researcher it was also helpful to have detailed guidelines to follow for data collection and interpretation.

I purposely chose constructivist grounded theory as this approach allows for methodological flexibility and recognizes the researcher’s prior experience and knowledge. It also supports my philosophical assumptions and personal world-views (Birks & Mills, 2015). I have already identified that I believe that the perception of reality varies between individuals and that there are multiple realities experienced by
different people exposed to the same phenomenon. I also believe that participants’ understanding of phenomena is contextual in meaning and shaped and changes over time. This aligns with constructivist grounded theory where subjectivity is embraced from an epistemological stance and multiples realities are accepted in the construction of knowledge (Charmaz 2006, 2014).

Charmaz’s (2014) method draws on the analytical frameworks of both Glaserian and Straussian traditions but provides for flexibility for the researcher to co-construct theoretical explanations with participants. My study area lacked undergraduate social work student contributions so it was important to include their voice. Keeping with the principles of the constructivist method I acknowledged that the researcher’s social reality is also a construction and that research is constructed, not discovered (Charmaz, 2014). Lastly, choosing Charmaz’s approach was suitable because it acknowledges the researcher’s prior experience brought to the research study. Charmaz (2014) states that if you use the assumption that social reality is multiple, processual and constructed then the researcher’s position, privileges, perspective, and interactions must be taken into account.

**Beginning Research Question**

A key characteristic of grounded theory research is that the researcher often enters the field of study without the narrow research question or hypothesis common in other research designs (Birks & Mills, 2015). Grounded theory progresses in response to the evolving data collection and analysis (Birks & Mills, 2015; Charmaz, 2014). As such, the research question in a grounded theory study, when possible, should be stated broadly and be viewed as a starting point. It should not keep the researcher from moving
in other directions once data gathering and analysis begin (Birks & Mills, 2015; Oktay, 2012). Charmaz (2014) states “Be willing to alter your research question when you discover that other questions have greater significance” (p. 26). It is important to let the data structure the research question not vice versa (Okay, 2012).

Thus, the research question posed for this study asks: *What is Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment?*

**Ethical Considerations**

Prior to beginning the study and data collection, ethical considerations were addressed. Identifying and adhering to ethical standards in this qualitative research study was of significant importance to the researcher. Before proceeding with the study, an ethics protocol was submitted to the University of Regina Research Ethics Board for review and approval. Priority was given to protecting participants from harm as there is often varying and potentially high risks of social or emotional harm in qualitative research studies (Creswell, 2013). However, this research study was categorized as low-risk as it did not include marginalized or vulnerable populations. Even though this was the case, power balances could still arise as the interviewee may perceive the interviewer as holding/having control and influence. Strategies were used to move the researcher and participants to a more equal sharing of power which included: scheduling interviews at a time and location of the participant’s choosing, using a flexible and unstructured approach to questioning so that participants assume greater power over the direction of the conversation, sharing the researcher’s understanding of key issues arising, and assuming an open stance towards the participants (sharing personal details and answering questions asked, both during and after the interview) (Birks & Mills, 2015).
In order to mitigate harm, I prepared the participants for the interview process by facilitating an understanding of informed consent and the implications for participation, degree of risk, and the steps taken to ensure confidentiality and anonymity. Participants were assigned a code to protect their identity. It was made clear that participants could decline to answer any questions and end the interview at any time. Participants were also told they could withdraw from the study at any time. Should participants have found the research process triggered negative emotions to the point of needing support beyond the scope of the researcher/participant interaction, I offered referrals to a variety of agencies and programs that provided counselling supports. I am also a practicing social worker with active membership in the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers (SASW) and adhered to my professional Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005).

Ethical strategies must also be employed when it comes to data analysis and collection. Creswell (2013) urges researchers to recognize the importance of the subjectivity of their own lens. Reflexivity entails intentional and continual reflection on the part of the researcher to be responsive to the information emerging as the research process proceeds. Participant review of transcripts ensured data had been recorded accurately and participant review of findings ensured that participant confidentiality had been achieved (Creswell, 2013). I took necessary measures to ensure data was stored in a confidential manner. All research files were kept on my personal computer that is private and password-protected. Only my thesis supervisor and I had access to the raw data. Hard copies of the data will be stored in a locked file cabinet in the supervisor’s office for a total of five years at which point they will be destroyed.
Lastly, conducting a research study using grounded theory methodology brings its own unique ethical considerations. It may be difficult to identify all possible ethical issues at the outset of a grounded theory study as it is not always possible to know the nature of the data that will be collected, who it will be collected from or how many sources of data will be sought. Grounded theory research is evolving and flexible, unpredictable, and the direction of the study can alter (Birks & Mills, 2015). For this reason it was imperative that I remain vigilant for possible ethical issues during the study and, to return to the Ethics Review Board if appropriate. However, this was not necessary as no ethical issues arose during the research process.

**Data Collection**

**Recruitment of participants.** According to Charmaz (2014), the population sample for qualitative research using grounded theory methodology is a selection of research participants who have first-hand experience that fits the research topic. Therefore, the sample for this study was undergraduate social work students enrolled in an accredited BSW or BISW program in Saskatchewan. The study parameters were restricted to participants living in the province of Saskatchewan to understand the participants’ views within this specific geographical context. Prior to participant recruitment, ethics approval was received from the University of Regina (U of R).

Participants were recruited through a variety of strategies. First, informational posters (*Appendix A*) were drafted that described the aim of the research, the population being recruited, and information on how to contact the researcher. A phone number and email address was provided on the poster as ways to contact the researcher, and potential participants were invited to contact the researcher if they had any questions about the
process. The posters were displayed in university settings such as the U of R Faculty of Social Work department, off-campus locations in Saskatoon and Prince Albert, the First Nations University of Saskatchewan (FNUC) School of Indigenous Social Work as well as, at colleges in Saskatchewan that offer social work programming affiliated with the U of R. They included: Northwest Regional College, Northlands College, Cumberland House College, Great Plains College, and Parkland Regional College. The informational poster was also shared electronically through the researcher’s professional and academic networks and included email and social media distribution. Social media distribution included sharing the poster with Facebook groups such as the Saskatoon Branch of the SASW and the Social Work Student Society (SWSS) in Saskatoon and Regina as well as the FNUC social work student group. Additionally, the poster was shared on an ecosocial work Facebook page in Saskatchewan that was not specifically associated with students. The poster was distributed via email through the U of R Faculty of Social Work Student Services department to all registered undergraduate students in the province. As well, the researcher contacted social work faculty and sessional lecturers inviting them to share the informational poster in their classes to target students from specific geographical locations that had not yet been targeted from. The researcher obtained further ethics approval to contact staff directly.

Participants initiated contact with the researcher via email or telephone. Those that contacted the researcher by email were asked to provide a telephone number and a convenient time to contact them. The researcher talked to all participants by telephone. During the telephone call, potential participants were screened for the study parameters: registered undergraduate social work students in an accredited social work program
living in the province of Saskatchewan. Participants were also screened for a willingness to participate in the study. Time was taken to review the study purpose, requirements, and expectations on the part of both the researcher and the participant. The initial conversation explored potential risks and benefits for the participant from partaking in the research project. Participants were informed that the project was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Information was also provided regarding confidentiality. Those who met the study criteria and were interested in volunteering for the study were invited to a face-to-face interview. Participants who participated in an interview were provided with a 20 dollar honorarium for their time.

**Sample size.** The number of participants in a grounded theory research study is another debated area. Grounded theory is an emergent process of learning about and interpreting participants’ views of their experience. Often, a researcher does not know what they will find until they begin data collection (Charmaz, 2014). Because of this, it is not possible to know at the start of the study how many participants are needed (Birks & Mills, 2015). In order to create a plausible grounded theory study the researcher must be willing to pursue what the data reveals and be tolerant to the prospect that their next participant will open up new possibilities. As a result, sampling decisions are made during data collection ensuring that participants are chosen based on ability to contribute to the evolving theory (Creswell, 2013).

Charmaz (2014) states that too many or too few interviews do not make a grounded theory more or less credible. A small sample size can produce a study of lasting significance while conversely having a large amount of data does not guarantee making an original contribution. She also makes the suggestion to think about the
purpose of the research and the analytical level to which the researcher aspires. A small study with simple claims may not require the same number of participants as a researcher making grand claims that will require more rigor and thoroughness (Charmaz, 2006).

Lastly, I am a graduate student undertaking this study as partial requirements for my MSW degree. Therefore, the sample size for this study is a balance between methodological soundness, rigour, and feasibility for a Master’s study.

**Data collection procedure.** Gathering rich data is the key to providing and generating a solid analysis in grounded theory. Charmaz (2014) describes rich data as data that “reveals participants’ views, feelings, intentions, actions as well as the contexts and structures of their lives” (p. 23). Face-to-face interviews was chosen as the primary source of data collection. I used the technique of intensive interviewing, which “typically means a gently-guided, one-sided conversation” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 56) to understand the research participants’ perspectives about the topic area. Charmaz (2014) states that intensive interviewing fits grounded theory methods as interviews can be open-ended and emergent while still allowing the researcher to control the direction and pacing of the interview.

The interview was scheduled at a convenient time for both the participant and the researcher. As most participants did not have a location in mind for the interview, the researcher provided each participant with a list of locations. The participant was then able to choose the location that was most convenient and comfortable for them. At the start of the interview, the participants were again provided with verbal information on the research study and purpose, costs, benefits, risk, confidentiality, participant requirements, the voluntary nature of the study, and their right to withdraw. Participants
were given an *Informed Consent (Appendix B)* with the same written information to review and were able to ask any clarifying questions they had about the study. Signing the *Informed Consent* signified agreement to participate in the study as well as consent to be audio-recorded. Participants were provided with a signed copy of the consent.

A semi-structured interview guide (*Appendix C*) was used during the interview process. Charmaz (2014) recommends using the guide as a flexible tool. At times, additional questions were asked to explore participants’ responses and gain a deeper understanding of the statements made. It is beneficial for a novice researcher, such as me to use an interview guide to prevent going off track and to go back to a subject if the interviewee goes off topic (Charmaz, 2014).

A constructivist approach was used while interviewing. This allowed the research participant to tell their story without the researcher preconceiving the content and enabled the researcher to move in the direction of the interview (Charmaz, 2014). The purpose of a constructivist approach is to ask meaningful questions without forcing responses and elicit participants’ definitions of terms, situations, and events (Charmaz, 2014). However, it is important to note that, as the researcher, I was required to provide prompting and clarification for several of the participants during the interview. I believe this was a result of the participants not having a large knowledge base about the topic area. Overall, participants appeared comfortable during the interview and asked questions when clarification about a question or term was needed. I also observed a sense of *right* and *wrong* from the participants with some participants asking if they had provided the *right* answer. Again this could be attributed to not knowing a lot about the subject or perhaps from a student mentality of having to give a correct answer.
Interviews were between 35 and 60 minutes in length. All interviews were audio-recorded using a digital recorder with supplemental hand-written notes. The recordings were transcribed verbatim onto my computer as soon as possible after the interview and deleted from the recording device. My computer is a private-use computer, protected with a passcode to ensure no one else has access to the data files. Participants were emailed a copy of their transcript for validation purposes. None of the participants provided any additional feedback, insights, or changes to their transcript.

As the study progressed I chose to collect some basic demographic information about the participants (Appendix D) to gain an understanding of who chose to participate in the study. Demographic information included: age, gender, ethnicity, and any previous post-secondary education. Because this was not decided at the outset of my study, an amendment to my ethics protocol was required. For this reason some participants provided their demographic information at the interview while others, who were interviewed prior to the amendment, were emailed for their responses. In total, 11 undergraduate social work students currently registered in an accredited social work program in Saskatchewan were interviewed for this study. Three participants were from northern Saskatchewan, four were from the central area of the province, and four lived in the southern half. Participants ranged in age from 17 to 42 with an average age of 27. The participants’ self-identified gender included ten females and one male. The participants’ self-identified ethnicity included: nine Caucasian, one Aboriginal, and one abstention. Six of the 11 participants had previous post-secondary education.

Data Analysis

Data collection and data analysis occurs simultaneously in grounded theory. This is referred to as constant comparative method (Birks & Miller, 2015; Charmaz, 2014;
The process of data analysis requires direct interaction between the researcher and the data, takes place over time, moves through phases, and results in a “grounded theory” (Birks & Mills, 2015). It also involves making comparisons and asking questions in order to conceptualize, categorize and establish relationships between theoretical concepts (Charmaz, 2014). As soon as data is collected, analysis begins with the researcher separating, sorting, and synthesizing the data through qualitative coding. Coding means attaching a label to segments of the data that depict what each segment is about and allows the researcher to raise analytic questions about the data (Charmaz, 2014). I engaged in two phases of data analysis: initial coding and focused coding. This process formed the basis for my analytical construction of the data and emerging categories.

**Coding.** Coding is the pivotal link between collecting data and developing an emerging theory to explain the data (Charmaz, 2014). A constructivist approach to data analysis involves two main phases of coding, initial coding, involving naming each word, line, or segment of data, and focused coding, a selective phrase that uses the most significant or frequent initial codes to sort, synthesize, integrate, and organize large amounts of data (Charmaz, 2006; 2014). Early coding of every data line allows the researcher to consider all possible meanings and moves the researcher away from preconceptions. The researcher progressively links codes into higher-level categories or conceptual themes, concepts that go together and are identified as important in the analysis (Oktay, 2012).

Initial coding involved naming each line of my data. I engaged in this practice by reading every line of each participant’s transcribed interview and assigning it a code by
hand. The purpose of initial coding is to look at the data anew and begin to identify processes (Charmaz, 2014). I endeavoured to keep my codes simple, direct, and spontaneous and coded for actions and processes (Charmaz, 2014). Charmaz (2014) states that initial codes are provisional, comparative, and grounded in the data. Therefore, I allowed myself to remain open to other possible theoretical directions and analytical possibilities. With line-by-line initial coding, I was able to gain insight into my data and make decisions about what kind of data needed to be collected next as well as identify gaps.

The second phase of data analysis was focused coding. Focused coding moves further into the comparative process. This process involves making decisions about which initial codes make the most analytical sense to categorize the data (Charmaz, 2014). Focused codes appear more frequently in the data and have greater significance. During this phase I compared data with data within the same interview and then moved across interviews in a continuous process of comparing and analyzing at which point categories began to emerge. I used NVIVO, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) program for this stage of analysis. During both phases of coding, I used the constant comparative method of grounded theory to make comparisons at each level of analytical work. Comparison was done to find similarities and differences within the data (Charmaz, 2006).

I also engaged in memo writing to capture internal analytic dialogue and prompt reflexivity. Memos are essentially analytical notes that record the researcher’s thinking during the grounded theory process (Birks & Mills, 2015). Memo-writing is an integral part of grounded theory methodology because it “prompts you to analyze your data and
codes early in the researcher process” (Charmaz, 2014, p. 162). Throughout my study I wrote memos about the data. These memos allowed for conceptualization of the data and formed the basis for identifying emerging categories.

**Constructing categories.** A category is “a conceptual element in a theory” (Glasser & Strauss, 1967). Categories explain ideas, events, or processes (Charmaz, 2014). At this point in my data analysis I had identified preliminary and tentative categories, although they were not fully developed. The next step was to gather more data that focused on the categories. This process is called theoretical sampling whereby new data sources are chosen for their potential to develop emerging theory (Charmaz, 2014). I used theoretical sampling emergently to build my categories and discover gaps. Theoretical sampling continues until theoretical saturation is reached at which point no new data is collected. In grounded theory, theoretical saturation occurs when no new properties of the category emerge and comparison of new data elicits no new theoretical information (Birks & Mills, 2015). Theoretical saturation is what is aimed for in grounded theory. Achieving theoretical saturation is sometimes difficult or is falsely claimed. This is not because the researcher is intentionally trying to mislead but rather from invoking the term uncritically (Charmaz, 2014).

Once I determined that no more data would be collected and the categories were established, the next step was to engage in theoretical sorting. This provides the logic for the analysis and a way of creating and refining theoretical links that prompts comparisons between categories (Charmaz, 2014). At this stage, I went back to using paper and pen. I wrote the categories on slips of paper in order to visualize them and move them around to see how they linked best together. I also sorted my memos by
hand. This allowed me to see relationships and links between categories and subcategories and I could collapse the categories that were similar. As a result, three categories and ten subcategories emerged at my final analysis.

Lastly, I used the technique of diagramming to add to my analysis. Diagrams provide concrete images of ideas and a visual representation of the categories and their relationships (Charmaz, 2014). I created a model (Figure 1) that best represented my categories and the relationship between them. Diagramming occurred simultaneously with theoretical sorting. My model changed to reflect the ongoing analysis of my categories until a final draft was made.

Throughout data analysis I put forth my best effort to be aware of my preconceptions. I made an effort to not force my preconceptions on the data and to ensure that any predetermined ideas earned their way into the analysis (Charmaz, 2014). Grounded theory is challenging for the beginning researcher. It requires the researcher to be skilled enough to apply the canons of the method in order to produce a reliable study. Grounded theory is time-consuming and the researcher must be prepared to set aside time to reflect and think conceptually about the data. For this study, I applied the canons of grounded theory to the best of my ability as a novice researcher in order to produce a credible study while taking into account the time limitations of being a graduate student.

**Trustworthiness and Credibility**

In a qualitative research study, trustworthiness refers to the *truth* of the findings and involves attention to the quality of the analysis, including techniques that support the credibility of interpretation (Green & Thorogood, 2009). The most recognized set of
criteria for a qualitative research study are credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility means that the researcher has internal consistency; transferability refers to the applicability of the findings to other settings; dependability is the consistency of the findings to other settings; and confirmability means that the findings should represent the situation of the respondents and not the subjective views of the researcher (Oktay, 2012). A variety of techniques can be used to satisfy each criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Different qualitative methods have different goals, making it difficult to apply one single set of standards in determining trustworthiness and credibility.

Charmaz (2006, 2014) considers the evaluation of grounded theory from a constructivist paradigm, identifying four criteria: credibility, which reflects logic and conceptual grounding; originality, including reference to the significance of the study; resonance, which considers the need for the theory to have meaning and scope for all those for whom it may be relevant; and usefulness, in relation to knowledge development and practical application. Ultimately, Charmaz (2006) does not present these as a single right way to evaluate grounded theory studies, but as criteria that give some guidelines. Thus, there are still specific techniques a researcher can use to ensure rigour. The strategies that were used in this research study to ensure trustworthiness and credibility were: reflexivity, theoretical sensitivity, relationality, transparency, member checking, and the use of a reflexive journal.

Reflexivity includes examining how the researcher’s interests, positions, and assumptions influenced the research study as well as informing how the researcher conducted the study, related to the research participants, and represented them in written
This was especially important for this research study as this is a topic that not only interests me but is one that I am passionate about. In addition to reflexivity is theoretical sensitivity, which is specific to grounded theory methodology. Theoretical sensitivity is based on the understanding a researcher brings to the study based on personal and professional experience in the area that enables theory to be recognized or developed from the data (Oktay, 2012). It emphasizes the reflexive use of self in the process of developing research questions and doing analysis (Hall & Callery, 2001). Reflexivity and theoretical sensitivity supplement one another as reflexivity is directed at the interview and participant observation process while theoretical sensitivity refers to the researcher’s ability to analyze the data and develop a theory (Hall & Callery, 2001). The validity of the research is enhanced when the researcher recognizes the extent to which the findings reflect the personal qualities of the researcher.

Relationality addresses power and trust relationships between the researcher and participants (Hall & Callery, 2001). In grounded theory the relationship between the researcher and participants is one of give-and-take. Interviews are not neutral, context-free tools, but rather an interplay between two people that leads to data construction (Birks & Mills, 2015). The researcher must be mindful of creating a relationship of reciprocity and equality. This was done by focusing on participants, answering any questions the participants had, yielding control over the flow and content of the interview, and allowing for participants’ voices in the interpretation of the data (Birks & Mills, 2015). Otherwise, research results may manifest power imbalances. Relationality recognizes connectedness between the researcher and the participants and provides an opportunity to account for and address power imbalances (Hall & Callery, 2001). I
established trust and demonstrated caring during the interview process, thus minimizing a hierarchical relationship.

Lastly, I employed transparency and member checking. Transparency “relates to the explicitness of the methods used, and how clearly they are outlined for the reader in research reports” (Green & Thorogood, 2009, p. 220). I provided an honest and clear account of the actual procedures used for analyzing the data. In this case, the grounded theory methods for conducting the research study were clearly explained and adhered to. Member checks were conducted, whereby data, analytic categories, and interpretations and conclusions were tested with the participants from whom the data were collected (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This occurred after preliminary themes were identified in the data.

Additionally, the researcher should keep a reflexive journal. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe the reflexive journal as a diary of the researcher’s experiences throughout the study. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), the reflexive journal has three main purposes. They are “1) The daily schedule and logistics of the study; 2) a personal diary that provides the opportunity for catharsis, for reflection upon what is happening in terms of one’s own values and interests, and for speculation about growing insights; and 3) a methodological log in which methodological decisions and accompanying rationales are recorded” (p. 327). I used the reflexive journal to record personal thoughts, feelings, and observations on the research process as well as methodological decisions. The journal was also used to record potential problems, insights, and thoughts on emerging patterns in the data.
Summary

This chapter explained the methodology used in conducting this study. First, it established the rationale for selecting qualitative inquiry and provided an account of the researcher’s perspective. Next, the chapter provided an overview of grounded theory in terms of its origins, assumptions, and evolution and a rationale for choosing the constructivist approach to grounded theory. Ethical consideration was reported followed by a detailed account of data analysis. The chapter concluded with measures to ensure trustworthiness in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

The next chapter presents the three categories emerging from the joint process of data collection and analysis. It highlights both shared and unique experiences among the research participants and their understanding of the environment in social work practice.
Chapter Four: Findings

This chapter presents the findings that answer the research question: “What is Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment?”

For the purpose of this study environment is defined as the physical environment, both natural and built. Through the simultaneous process of data collection and analysis, three categories and ten subcategories emerged from the qualitative data which are listed in Table 1.

Categories and Subcategories

I begin with the category knowledge of the environment, which describes the participants’ knowledge of the physical and natural environment and sense of responsibility. The second category, lack of professional knowledge, explains the paucity of information about the environment in relation to social work education and practice. I conclude with the third category, transforming social work practice. This category outlines what is needed in order for undergraduate social work students to incorporate the environment in social work practice.

Table 1

List of Categories and Subcategories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Subcategories</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge of the environment</td>
<td>Being impacted</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Personal connection to the environment</td>
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<td>Acknowledging different perspectives</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling a sense of responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of professional knowledge</td>
<td>Limited education</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Overlooking the environment</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Unprepared to include the environment in social work practice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transforming social work practice</td>
<td>Rethinking the environment</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Needing education</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Incorporating the environment in social work practice</td>
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**Knowledge of the environment.** This category describes the participant’s personal environmental knowledge and experiences. This knowledge recognizes the interdependence between individuals and the environment. Awareness of the environment led many participants to express their own personal connection to the environment, thereby reinforcing the importance of the environment to personal well-being. The value that Indigenous culture places on the environment was acknowledged by the participants, which further established for them the relationship between person and environment. Alternatively, there was acknowledgement that a Western perspective of the environment ignores this relationship. Examining different cultural perspectives combined with noting the mutual impact between person and environment prompted feeling a sense of responsibility towards the environment. The first subcategory describes the mutual impact between the person and the environment.

**Being impacted.** All the participants recognized the influence that person and environment have on each other, ranging from the observation of human exploitation of Earth’s resources to the displacement of people from small island nations due to rising sea levels. According to the participants, this impact indicates a direct relationship between environmental welfare and personal well-being, often with the realization that there is no separation between the two. Recognition of this relationship came from personal learning and experiences, such as viewing documentaries, social media, being in nature, and witnessing changes to the environment first-hand. Many of the participants expressed a personal interest in the environment, which prompted their own further investigation and learning. For instance, Participant 9 (P Michelle) was involved with permaculture, while Participant 8 (P8) made the environment a focus in her life.
after learning about environmental issues and recognizing the impacts to humans, animals, and the environment.

Human impact on the environment was identified by all the participants as human activities and influences that are currently harming the Earth such as, deforestation, the tar sands and pipelines, air and water pollution, loss of wildlife, and improper disposal of waste. Concern was expressed about the limitations of Earth’s resources and the effect human impact has on the environment. Participant 11 (P11) realized this was the case with urban sprawl, building outwards and not upwards, noting:

Quickly developing buildings that are poorly constructed and not a lot of people are living in them is concerning for me . . . that’s a waste of resources and money, but it’s also, we’re ruining what we have left of the prairie environment around us.

These occurrences were perceived as global issues. The magnitude of the problem was noted as a long-standing issue and an argument was made that it is taking too long for people to notice environmental impacts.

As a result of these environmental impacts visible physical changes to the environment were unmistakable. Having visited the same lake every year since childhood, P8 has observed changes to the water and land over the last 10 years noting boil water advisories for the first month of every camping season in more recent years, cloudy lake water, and shifting roads due to too much moisture from flooding. These changes were considered a disruption to the Earth’s systems and concern was raised that these changes could have a lasting impact on the environment. Participant 1 (P1) asserted that “removing one part of the ecosystem affects the whole.” This was
attributed to the human species acting negligently towards the Earth. Overall, participants predicted more frequent occurrences of environmental problems in the future as a result of this negligence.

In addition, participants were aware of how the environment affects people and their personal well-being. A connection was made between an individual’s mental and physical well-being, “It’s like being a plant in poor soil, you can’t really survive to the best of your ability . . . your environment affects who and how you are and how you feel” (Participant 3 [P3]). Participant 5 (P Laz) concurred, “You can’t have a healthy person mentally, physically, emotionally without having a healthy environment.”

There was agreement that all individuals are affected by the environment, although some participants held the view that marginalized individuals and those with a lower socio-economic status were more vulnerable to the effects of environmental issues, “A lot of people who don’t have a lot of money are impacted a lot more by the degradation of the environment” (Participant 4 [P4]). These individuals were thought to have more health problems, were less likely to be aware of the harmful effects of certain environmental issues, and less likely to be able to voice their concerns in order for change to occur.

The environment was also discussed in terms of physical location and place. Living in poor environmental conditions was considered detrimental to both physical and mental health. Commenting on an article that discussed improper disposal of a chemical that was contributing to physical illness, miscarriages, and early death, Participant P6 (P6) stated, “All of the toxins that we’re putting into the Earth, or living near factories, that kind of stuff definitely impacts physical health and that in turn affects mental
health.” A few participants noted that where an individual lives geographically can limit access to resources. Participant 2 (P2) discussed the epidemic of suicides in northern Saskatchewan among teenage girls citing isolation as a key factor in accessing resources, “The reserves north of xxxx at xxxx, which is where these girls committed suicide, it’s still 60 km from xxxx and when you’re a teenager how do you get to those resources to help your mental illness?” Along the same lines, being concerned about having shelter, a basic necessity, could affect other areas of your life. P3 saw a direct relationship between stable housing and a high probability of poor outcomes when working with teen parents:

If they didn’t have the money to have shelter, a basic physical need that we all need, they were at risk of losing their children because they couldn’t provide them with shelter and they couldn’t be successful at school because they’re too busy worrying about money for food and shelter to be able to keep their children, and, so, not being successful at school doesn’t get them the education they need to be able to support them, so it’s like a vicious cycle . . . if you don’t have the means that you need in your physical environment it can, it affects everything else and then it’s like a domino effect.

Accordingly, participants recognized that the environment affects the people social workers interact with, “If the physical environment isn’t healthy, it’s pretty hard to have clients that are healthy” (P3). In addition, participants stated that it was important to understand and consider each individual’s environment and where a person comes from, for example, working with individuals from northern communities versus people who have emigrated from other countries. P4 described the importance of having the
right environment when talking with youth about their issues and problems, “When youth go into your office . . . they’re not in their right environment. They’re sitting in four walls, they’re closed, which they’re never used to and they don’t like to talk in that setting.” Going on to explain that being in the natural environment, “they open up a lot more and I think that’s how you have to heal people” (P4).

Recognizing the interdependence between social work clients and the environment was described as strengthening the need to include the environment in social work practice. Further supporting this inclusion, participants described their own personal connection to the environment and how it benefits them.

**Personal connection to the environment.** All participants shared a personal connection they had with the environment. This connection uncovered personal benefits from engaging with nature, which included disconnecting from everyday stressors, and for some, healing from traumatic events, demonstrating that all individuals are impacted by the environment. As a result, participants were able to appreciate how the environment could be implemented in social work practice for the well-being of social work clients. In addition, emotional responses to the destruction of the environment were evoked based on participants’ connection to the environment with a realization that clients could also be affected in the same way.

The environment was important to participants’ personal well-being, “It’s always been beneficial to me” (P2). Participants described feeling good in nature, taking opportunities to be outside, embracing nature and natural elements. A few participants equated nature with personal fulfilment and happiness. “For me personally, that’s like,
my happy place,” stated P1. Others noted the role the environment played in healing from traumatic experiences:

I had a friend pass away and he took own life and I, uh, found him, so it was horrible, but then that summer I had already, uh, um, committed to doing this permaculture thing and just being, like, I was in a horrible state of mind and my decision to still do that ended up being probably the best thing I could have done, because I just got to be outside and I wasn’t, you know, lying in bed upset and crying, I was out in the garden, like, feeling sun on my face . . . that’s probably why I see, like, such a benefit from it, because it did help me a lot. (P Michelle)

The environment was viewed as a tool for self-care and as a way to de-stress from the busy-ness of everyday life. Being in nature was a way to limit distractions and disconnect from technology. Participants focused on being mindful and allowing themselves to focus on the present moment of being in nature. As a result, they recognized benefits to mental health and well-being. P6 said, “I feel like I’m a lot more mindful when I’m in nature versus in the city.” This participant also considered the environment to be a valued part of personal identity, “I feel better when I’m outside with nature and I feel, like, if, if I lost that, that would be pretty big piece of my identity that’s, that would be gone.” For others, it was a way to get to know yourself and be present with feelings and emotions. For instance, P2 talked about a camping trip that allowed processing of grief and emotions:

My best friend’s mom committed suicide earlier this year and it was like, I thought I was grieving, you know, going through the process and, and I just wasn’t, it was kinda like I don’t want to deal with this, life goes on and then I, I
took a camping trip with my brother and . . . you’re forced to feel when you have no other distractions and, so, at the time it was like, oh I hate this, I just, I just wanna go home, like, when I felt like I, I took the phone away and that’s all I could think about and, like, it sucked at the time cause it was this horrible, tragic, sad event, um, but looking back on it two months later it was a really, really great thing because once you take away those distractions you are forced to think about the issue . . . it was extremely beneficial.

While participants recognized the benefits and therapeutic elements of their connection with the environment, it was difficult for participants to describe why or how this connection occurred. For the most part it was considered an inherent personal characteristic. In trying to describe this connection P7 stated, “It is a very real feeling, I can recognize it when I do feel it” and P11 said, “It’s just like our nature . . . I don’t know exactly specifically what it is.” P Michelle discussed the connection to the environment in terms of being a part of something that is bigger than yourself, “Humans are social creatures so, if you can feel connected to something bigger than yourself, then your own well-being is better.”

The personal connection participants described was an important step in generating an understanding of how the environment could be integrated in social work practice to assist clients. Personally experiencing the positive effects of the environment for themselves, the participants suggested that the same could be true for clients. P6 saw a future role for social work as bridging a connection to nature with clients, mentioning that many people seeking mental health support are isolated in their homes and not spending time with nature. As well, the connection made participants more aware of
creating a welcoming space for clients and being able to change the environment and/or physical location when possible when meeting with clients, such as going outdoors to meet. A few participants were already using the environment with clients in current work settings. For example, one participant discussed using the environment as way to build a relationship and trust with clients. P4 explained the advantages of taking youth on a fly-in camping trip with no modern amenities and no technology:

You really start to see their issues come forward . . . everything starts coming out, what their past experiences have been, their abuse they’ve been through, the trauma, they really start trusting the people on the environment with them ‘cause they’re experiencing the same situation.

On the same theme of using the environment to build relationships, participants speculated about how the environment could possibly negatively affect the relationship between social worker and client. For example, Participant 10 (P10) talked about clients entering a “cold, abrasive office building that’s huge and hard to navigate” stating, “It’s probably changing the way that that relationship is working and the openness that that client is having with their social worker . . . to be frank it’s not a very welcoming environment to be in.”

Being connected to the environment elicited participants emotional responses when thinking about the damage that has been done to the environment. One participant, referring to the forest fires in northern Saskatchewan was candid:

The physical environment it’s not very pretty in xxxx anymore. You drive through north of xxxx and its like sticks . . . I guess it affects me, like obviously makes me feel sad, the physical environment has gone to shit (P2).
The most common emotion expressed about the environment was sadness: “I think it’s sad to say that we’ve pretty damaged our Earth” (P3) and speaking about environmental changes to a childhood vacation spot, P8 stated, “really makes me sad, cause I love being in the lake.”

Participants expressed feelings of empathy for individuals who are affected by the environment, noting that environmental issues can affect an individual’s mood and emotions. P Laz talked about the emotional effects of mining in Northern communities: The Northern communities, ones with the mining happening near them, that they’re losing, they’re losing beauty, they’re losing their peace . . . they’re having a lot of worry and anxiety with something so close there and they see articles about the pollution.

Recognizing that individuals are emotionally affected by environmental issues added to the rationale that social work should be aware of environmental concerns and issues so that social workers can offer support when needed.

While having a personal connection to the environment allowed participants to recognize that the environment could be included in social work practice it also started a conversation. For some, their whole culture focuses on the environment.

**Acknowledging different perspectives.** This subcategory discusses the contrast between Indigenous and Western relationships to and with the environment. The connection between Indigenous peoples and the environment was described by participants as the existence of a reciprocal relationship. Being aware of an Indigenous perspective led most participants to acknowledge that some cultures value the Earth. However, Western culture was critiqued for its inability to value a connection with the
natural environment, noting that political and governmental influences affect this connection, whereby the environment is regarded from an economic perspective. Participants described Indigenous relationships with the environment as one of mutual respect for all living beings and nature. There was also appreciation for the role of Mother Earth:

Their culture’s quite focused on Mother Earth . . . being able to connect yourself and everything else in the world all together and bringing it back to Mother Earth and how she’s the creator of everything and that we’re all intertwined, it’s like a circle of life (P1).

Other participants noted Indigenous concepts of the environment included a hunter-gatherer lifestyle, value and respect for the land, water and natural resources, and a connection with the environment. For example, P3 stated, “They actually think about the Earth as an important piece of health and well-being, meaning that if the environment is not healthy, neither will individuals.” Several participants recognized the reciprocal relationship with the environment with P7 describing it as a “symbiotic relationship, what we’re putting into it is what we’re getting out, rather than let’s just take it and use it for our own, our own interests.” P8 had similar thoughts and stressed the importance of a balanced relationship, “Anything you take, you give back. You give thanks and maintaining balance . . . balance is extremely important.”

According to the participants, Indigenous perspectives were in direct contrast to the Western world-views that most of modern society has adopted. Participants acknowledged that the Western perspective does not have the same type of connection with the environment. P11 said that Western views disregard any type of connection to
the land, “I guess we just kind of forget about the natural world around us.” P7 thought that Western views have been imposed on the environment, “It’s a one-way kind of relationship . . . I think sometimes there’s this perspective that these resources are unlimited and that they won’t run out and that we can, like, exploit essentially.”

According to participants, this stance creates the impression that, for the most part, the human population thinks the environment is available only for their benefit. In addition, a few participants remarked that there is not a strong desire to share the land with other species or consider what is beneficial for the environment.

Several participants recognized that government politics and policies are a leading factor when it comes to environmental decisions. This was stated in terms of how the economy plays a key role, where money and resources are valued above the environment. Participants had several opinions about this logic. For example, P1 stated, “There’s more people who are supportive of like a business venture and making more money” and P4 said, “The thing that I really noticed in the issues is, creating a land for future generations, or to make money right now, and I think a lot of people are caught between that.” Another participant commented, “The government seems to be valuing money and resources over people’s right to the land” (P11).

An understanding developed that different worldviews have an influence on how the environment is viewed and, therefore, on what decisions are being made for the environment. Currently, in modern-day society the dominant Western perspective prevails, which will continue to permit degradation of the environment. Examining different perspectives, noticing the mutual impact between person and environment, and
having a personal connection, led participants to recognize that they have a responsibility for the environment.

**Feeling a sense of responsibility.** Having a connection to the environment and understanding the impact of environmental issues fostered feeling a sense of responsibility to take action to help the environment and to offer support to protect the Earth from further human destruction. “I definitely believe we have a responsibility to the environment . . . to make it a healthy place as people who live here for future generations,” stated P3. In reference to natural resources, P7 thought more should be done, “It’s very clear to me that those things are being taken for granted essentially and more can be done to protect those precious resources.” These beliefs provided motivation to help the environment.

Help was discussed by the participants in several ways, such as being aware of their own actions that impact the environment, assisting others to care for the environment, and creating opportunity for change. Being informed about current issues affecting the environment was essential in order to take action effectively. Proposing action to bring about change permitted participants to consider what this could mean for their future social work practice.

Primarily, taking action consisted of personal choices and responsibility, such as: improving the environment, getting personally involved in community initiatives, making personal lifestyle changes, and being aware of one’s own actions towards the environment. Alternatively, raising awareness and bringing people together in the community were ideas for getting others involved and creating opportunities for change. Participants indicated that these actions would have to take place on their personal time.
They did not think it would be possible to include such activities at their work place, due to the fact that the environment was not likely a part of regular job duties.

Challenges and limits to helping the environment were raised. One difficulty was the stigma attached to individuals who care for the environment. There is a likelihood of being negatively labelled and/or needing to curtail comments so that you are not imposing your views about the environment on others. P11 had experienced this stereotype and tries to be mindful when talking about the environment, “Some people view people imposing those ideas about environmental issues as preachy, or like, they’re the hippy . . . I feel like there’s a stereotype.” In addition, it was noted that taking part in environmental issues is voluntary and people will make their own choices. As P Laz stated, “The thing about people, you could lead a horse to water, you could tell them, but sometimes they will do what they do.” As indicated by the participants, other factors in ignoring the environment included the reality that most people are overwhelmed with everyday life, a large number of individuals are ignorant about the issues affecting the environment and people experience uncertainty on how to get involved.

According to several participants an important factor to adequately take action to help the environment was being knowledgeable and up-to-date on environmental issues. For example, “learning things about climate change and learning things about water pollution and that kind of thing” (P7). Participants indicated they became informed about the environment through the news, watching documentaries, and reading articles. However, there was a need to have access to reliable information as well as recognizing bias and sensationalism in the news. Researching for facts and thinking critically were imperative in learning about environmental issues.
Feeling a sense of responsibility for the environment came from the participants’ personal standpoint and centred on personal initiative. They concluded that, if the environment was to be included in social work practice it would have to be on an individual’s own time. Participants explained there is insufficient information about how to incorporate the environment as part of social work practice which is why action would have to be taken individually. This lack of professional knowledge is discussed in the next category.

Lack of professional knowledge. This category describes a lack of professional knowledge due to the dearth of information regarding the physical and natural environment in relationship to social work practice and includes the gaps in social work education identified by the participants. All the participants stated that the environment was not a topic readily discussed in the social work curriculum. Limited education on the topic caused participants to overlook the connection between the environment and social work practice, and, as a result, they were unaware of how to include the environment in social work practice. The subcategories of limited education, overlooking the environment, and being unprepared to include the environment in social work practice, present the conditions and processes that contribute to this lack of professional knowledge.

Limited education. Inadequate social work curriculum and education designed to educate on the topic is described in this subcategory. Participants indicated the environment was not a part of the regular curriculum, which also included no standard definition for the environment. According to the participants some information about the environment was included in particular courses if instructors and/or peers had a
personal interest in the topic. However, participants were not aware of environmental social work or ecosocial work as defined in the literature.

According to participants in the U of R program, the current social work curriculum provides limited opportunity to learn about the environment and how it relates to social work practice as it was largely missing from the curriculum. As P3 stated, the environment was “non-existent in our educational journey.” Several other participants agreed with this claim. P11 stated, “In terms of covering ecology or environment within the classroom setting, we haven’t; that hasn’t really been discussed in any of our classes.” P Laz said, “It’s not something that’s talked about or even in an interest when it comes to social work and the environment . . . it’s just not there, not that I’ve seen.” P Michelle stated, “I don’t feel there’s classes that are saying okay, so we all know that there’s issues with the environment, this is what a social worker could do about it . . .it’s not being directly incorporated in any tangible way.”

Furthermore, lack of focus on the environment in the social work curriculum resulted in an absence of any standard definition for the environment. Some participants relied on the information received about the environment in their social work program, which centred on the social environment to provide a definition. For example, P3 specified:

Environment in social work practice as far as all the classes I’ve taken is person in environment . . . as social work students we learn about where the client is at and their environment of their home life, their family life.

Similarly, P10 recognized the social environment stating, “The social work part of my brain goes towards the space that’s created between two people, . . . specifically in social
work practice, if you’re interviewing somebody, or if you’re having conversation with somebody.” However, if the physical and natural environment was more of a personal interest, participants’ definition of environment reflected this interest. P4 defined environment as, “Your surroundings and, especially with social work, we’re going into helping people so how can we use our environment and our surroundings to help the people we’re dealing with.” Likewise P7 explained environment as, “the ways in which the environment affects the way we operate and live as a species.” Overall, participants had wide-ranging definitions and appeared to rely on a combination of what they had learned in a social work setting and their own personal experience to provide a working definition of the environment.

If the [natural] environment was referenced in social work curriculum, it usually came from an instructor or peer who had an interest in the topic but was not generally a part of the planned curriculum. This meant that the environment was mentioned in class but not presented as a separate area of social work practice. According to participants, instructors aware of environmental issues and having a personal interest in the environment were more likely to include the topic in the classroom. For example, P1 stated, “My professor is quite the advocate as a protester and so talks a lot about environmental sustainability.” Learning from peers who had a personal interest in the environment was another way participants heard about the environment. Partnering with a peer who had knowledge about environmental degradation and livestock production, P7 was able to learn about the environment when completing an assignment in an entry-level social work class. P10 heard about the topic during a class presentation, “One of my classmates . . . she just presented on social work and the environment, showed us a
video she had made.” There was only one participant who remarked that the environment was deliberately included in class. P6 reported that the environment was mentioned as being a part of *SASW Practice Guidelines*. However, that was the extent of the inclusion with no further explanation about how social work could use the environment in practice.

A participant who attended FNUC had a different experience learning about the physical and natural environment in school explaining that the environment is a big part of Indigenous social work:

“We talk a lot about soul and what soul is, what keeps driving your soul to go forward and . . . what makes you go forward is being on the land and going back to history with fishing, hunting and just having no materialistic items in your life (P4).”

In the BISW program the environment is an integral part of the curriculum. However, emphasis is placed on being in the environment and the spiritual connection to the land. The context of including the environment as part of social work practice is still lacking. As P4 concluded, “I do not know much about how; I guess the academics of social work and environmental.”

Not learning about the environment through the social work curriculum and without a standard definition of the environment means that participants failed to notice how the environment could be a part of social work practice. Consequently, participants had no or limited knowledge about ecosocial or environmental social work. However, participants ventured guesses about what environmental social work could entail. For instance, P11 stated, “It would be possibly certain environmental issues and how that
impacts people.” and P2 assumed “Environmental social work is an indirect practice . . . not one-on-one casework . . . policy-changing in regards to environment.” P Michelle said:

What I would think what it might mean would kind of be just activism, and with the pipelines, and with protecting water rights, and kind of that sort of work . . . raising awareness of other people seeing if what everyone can do in their own communities to help the environment.

**Overlooking the environment.** This subcategory describes how limited social work education about the environment allowed participants to disregard the environment as an integral aspect of social work practice. For the most part, participants indicated that social work is about people and that core social work values emphasize this. The environment is not currently established in the social work profession making it difficult for participants to identify the connection between social work and the environment.

The majority of participants agreed that individuals go into social work to work with people. As P6 said, “Because usually people don’t go into social work thinking environment, usually it’s, I want to work with people, I want to help people, I want to support people, and that environmental piece isn’t really in mind.” P3 stated, “The main focus is really just on people when it comes to our learning and our studies and not really so much on outside of that.” In addition, P Laz thought the social work core values, which also neglect the environment, were inadequate:

The core values of social work being committed to people, their safety, confidentiality . . . there aren’t many rules or regulations that, that are there for us
to stand up for, if there were more then we would have more of a solid to ground
to stand on.

P Laz went on to explain that social workers would have an obligation to the
environment if it was included in social work’s core values. Currently, the environment
is not part of these values and as a result it is emitted from everyday social work practice.

The belief that social work is about working with people indicates that the
environment has not been integrated into mainstream social work practice. P7 observed
the environment as “not very prevalent in the mainstream social work as far as my
understanding or my experience.” As well, participants indicated they had not seen the
environment as part of their field practice, which further dismissed the idea that the
environment could be a part of social work practice. Recounting previous experience in
the social work field, P11 commented that the environment had never been considered in
any of their experiences. Thus, participants were left with an overall sense of being ill-
equipped to include the environment in social work practice.

**Unprepared to include the environment in social work practice.** In this
subcategory participants expressed concern about not knowing how to include the
environment in future social work practice and indicated more direction was needed.
The lack of education on the topic and not understanding the relationship between social
work and the environment resulted in being ill-prepared to develop and incorporate
environmental approaches in future social work practice.

Even if the environment was recognized as an area that social work could
become involved in, it became clear that participants lacked the ability to do so. For
instance, P1 stated, “I’m just not informed about how to integrate things into a social
work practice.” P6 was confused about the intention of including the environment in social work practice, “I’m struggling with how to incorporate it into, like, client interactions or the work, like, the actual work we do as social workers.” Other participants voiced similar confusion about the purpose of the environment in social work practice. If the intent was to inform clients about the importance of environmental issues and get them involved, it was likely clients would have more important things to tend to. For example, P3 discussed the crisis mode they were used to when working with teen parents, making it nearly impossible to think about the environment, “A lot of times in those kinds of positions to be able to even get the things you need to get done without worrying about environment.” P Michelle had similar thoughts about including the environment with clients, “I’m not sure how you would make that relevant necessarily.” Participants indicated having clear definitions and aims for environmental social work would be helpful when including the environment in future practice, “If I’m not completely sure what I’m aiming towards I’m not going to know how to get there” (P6).

As current students, participants relayed that they did not know how the environment could fit in future social work practice and had not thought much about it. As P10 stated:

I don’t know what that would look like for me in the future as a practicing social worker . . . is it something that you integrate into your practice, or is it, I, yeah there is, I don’t know a lot about it.

In spite of the fact that participants may not have thought about how to include the environment in social work practice, it was something many of them wanted to strive for in their personal lives. Once again the context of personal versus professional arose,
showing that participants had a deeper personal understanding of the environment as opposed to in their professional capacity.

**Transforming social work practice.** Although the environment was missing from an educational and practice perspective, it provided an opportunity to think about including the environment in social work practice and what this would require. This category describes the transformation needed to include the environment in future social work practice. As outlined by the participants, this transformation comprises a reassessment of what the environment means to the field of social work, alterations to undergraduate social work education and curriculum, and ideas for incorporating the environment into social work practice. The participants also acknowledged barriers that would make it difficult for this transformation to occur.

**Rethinking the environment.** A change to social work practice begins with an exploration of how participants re-evaluated how the environment is considered in social work practice. Re-evaluation included a growing awareness that social and environmental issues originate from similar problems. The importance of the environment surfaced, along with speculation on a role for social work in addressing the environment. Participants concluded that the environment should be part of social work practice.

Participating in this research study led participants to begin to think differently about the environment. For instance, P2 stated, “I never would have ever thought that social workers would have an impact on environmental issues . . . I never made the connection of social workers and the environment. For me, social work was clients and, and office.” P3 said, “I really never thought of environment in social work practice, but
now just reflecting on that . . . I guess if the physical environment isn’t healthy, it’s pretty hard to have clients that are healthy.” For P7, learning about the environment from a class project inspired new ways of thinking about the environment:

It was a really great way for me to, yeah, think about some things that I hadn’t really thought about before in terms of the way that my food is produced and the impacts that it has on the environment and how that affects communities and folks.

P8, who had a personal understanding of environmental issues, was able to appreciate how the environment could be a social work area of practice, “I started focusing on it more and realizing that you can’t completely separate social issues from environment issues; there’s so many ways that they overlap.”

Recognizing the interdependence between social and environmental issues allowed participants to contemplate the social justice aspect of these issues. For example, housing was a social justice area comprised of both social and environmental issues. P7 discussed the effects of gentrification, “I do start thinking about things like gentrification, and I think about xxxx community with lots of local businesses coming into that area, and maybe not providing the services that are maybe of necessity to the area.” P Laz talked about the effects of mining on a community, “The way they live in and they’re close to a mining site; they’re only smelling the pulp mill, or something. You can’t have that person who’s sick, cannot stop being sick unless they, they move, or they are relocated.” Another participant realized the effect of the environment on displaced people who are being forced to leave their homes due to environmental destruction:
I think it’s going to cause a lot of issues for governments and neighbouring countries to figure out what the plan is ‘cause what happens to those people -Will they be stateless? Will they get the resources? . . . It’s a really complex issue (P11).

A select number of participants realized that social justice and environmental justice intersect. Aware of the protests at Standing Rock in the United States concerning the pipeline, P6 claimed, “I feel, like, that could also be an environmental justice, because of how the pipeline would affect the land there and the water, but then also how that in turn affects a marginalized population.” A link was also made between human rights and the environment. P8 stated, “Along with human rights comes the environment.” Coal extraction was provided as an example, “You got child labour in places that are abundant in coal . . . the environment, they just keep extracting, extracting, extracting, cutting down trees” (P8). With social justice and human rights issues being central to the social work profession recognition, of the interconnection between social justice, human rights, and the environment allowed participants to consider an expanded role for social work in addressing these issues. Three participants were able to see a parallel between the environment and social justice and human rights issues and an overall sense of responsibility was acknowledged.

Participants thought that the environment should be a part of social work practice after the topic was brought to their attention through participating in the research study. Talking about environmental issues, P11 stated, “I think that as social workers we have a responsibility to maybe become more aware of, of these issues as they seem to be happening more frequently.” P Michelle concluded, “I think it should be incorporated
for sure, like, I’m glad that you’re doing this research because I think the two can be very complementary.”

Even though beliefs about the environment and social work practice were re-evaluated and participants thought the environment should be a part of social work practice, it was noted that it would be difficult to implement any lasting transformation without education on the topic.

*Needing education.* This subcategory describes the changes needed to the social work curriculum in order to educate undergraduate social work students about the environment. According to the participants the social work programs they currently attend prepare future social workers to practice social work in a limited and mainstream way. Education on the environment and relating it to social work practice will be required if there is to be an expectation of including the environment in future social work practice.

The majority of the participants agreed that education on the topic should be available in their undergraduate social work degree program. P Michelle stated, “I would definitely say more education, awareness of opportunities, what positions a person could even fulfill in that area . . . so that they’re addressing both issues around the environment as well as social work issues.” P8 agreed, “I think more education other than just watching documentaries on Netflix and reading about environmental issues in the newspaper.”

According to the participants, the most effective way to provide education in the undergraduate curriculum would be to have a class specifically on social work and the environment. “I think if there was maybe a social work elective that was maybe required
by students to have to incorporate an environmental component I think that would be very beneficial,” commented P1. P3 said, “It should be something that is part of our education as a core course.” There was overall agreement that offering a class offered on social work and the environment would be beneficial to undergraduate students. Some participants thought the class should be a required core social work class while others thought that it could be an elective.

Apart from having a dedicated class on the subject, several participants agreed the topic of the environment should be integrated into the social work curriculum like any other topic that is considered social work domain i.e. addictions, mental health, child protection. For example, P10 said, “More just discussion of environmental issues in, like, other courses’ subject matter, or in the course outlines of this is what we’re covering this week. Kind of integrating it there would I think be an option.” P7 went on to say that:

I think that making that more of a priority would be really beneficial to students that, that are already maybe have that interest or, or don’t have that interest, and just need another elective, and will take it, and will learn something valuable.

It was also mentioned that social work faculty needed to be informed on the topic in order to better educate and prepare students for including the environment in their social work practice.

Participants expressed several other ideas for educating social work students about the environment. Two participants thought that volunteering for the environment would be a good way to learn about the environment. They asserted that students should have more than one option to learn about the environment and that volunteer
opportunities could be used as course credits. “It would be nice if you could volunteer for the environment and have that considered as volunteer work in the practicum . . . it would be nice to have a choice” (P Laz). Along the same lines as volunteering was being outside and in the community, which is not only beneficial to personal well-being but is another way to learn as opposed to lectures only in classroom settings. P10 discussed incorporating the environment into professional development opportunities “to kind of explore and learn more about how the environment does impact social work practice.” Another related idea was to have workshops and information sessions “on how to incorporate environmental justice into the work that we do, or how to incorporate the natural environment into our work with clients” (P6). Lastly, an inter-disciplinary approach to learning about the environment was suggested. Having an interest in sustainability, one participant recognized that other disciplines, such as biology and agriculture include the environment in curriculum. In this way, a class focusing on the environment from another discipline could be taken and counted as a course credit as long as the topic could be related to social work: “There is a lot of good work going on in sustainability, they’re just kind of keeping that kind of segregated as the environment, but to connect them I think works well” (P Michelle).

As a last resort, participants discussed taking personal initiative to learn about social work and the environment if the environment was not going to be included in the social work curriculum and education. As P10 stated, “I guess, will have to be me taking the responsibility on myself to look more into it . . . so kind of delving into that knowledge base myself and learning more about it,” or as P3 said, “I would just have to be passionate enough about it to be able to push myself to go and be up on the current
events.” For participants nearing the end of their program the probability of learning about the environment was unlikely, while participants who were just starting their program appeared more hopeful that there would be opportunities to learn about the environment. Even though participants expressed a personal interest in learning about the topic outside the classroom, the reality is that there are many other tasks that will take precedence and the environment will likely be forgotten. Participants concluded that, if the environment was excluded from undergraduate education, then it was unlikely to be included in any potential jobs, and therefore, difficult to include in practice: “Education would be the only opportunity I think to really push yourself in a way to learn and make it part of your tool box as you go forward and practice” (P3).

If the environment is going to be included in social work practice then an effort must be made to educate up-and-coming social workers on the topic.

Incorporating the environment in social work practice. Participants shared many innovative ideas for incorporating the environment into social work practice. Despite not having much education on the topic, participants were not short of ideas and they demonstrated a readiness to practice social work in a different way that would include the environment. However, barriers were identified to implementing the environment in social work practice namely, entering the work force and a limited social work world view. Many of the participants conveyed that if they wanted to help the environment it would have to be on their own time.

Although it was established that more education was needed regarding the environment, a fair number of ideas were expressed on how to incorporate the environment in social work practice. A few participants initially hesitated stating they
did not know what environmental social work would look like. Others suggested community groups and programming. For instance, P8 thought “networking in the community, or try to network with people who might want to run some sort of program, or, like, even a monthly class.” Similarly, P11 suggested “attending community events, and things that are involved outside.” P2 discussed the wildfires in Northern communities, explaining how community groups could be used to address environmental issues: “I like community groups, so if social workers say had these community groups for people with similar issues could come together like, ‘Oh four of you lost houses in the fire. Let’s talk about this.’ ” Further to this, the participant discussed travelling to communities affected by environmental issues and learning about the issues first hand in order to effectively provide social work intervention.

In addition, three participants mentioned protesting as a way to get involved in environmental issues, although for two the idea just came to mind while the third would actually participate in such events. One of the most common ideas to incorporate the environment was to get outside, either by taking clients outdoors or individually working outside, “Having opportunities to work outside actually is really nice and sometimes is more productive than sitting in front of your desk . . . having opportunities to take clients out for events and things that occur outside” (P11). P7 described a radical outlook:

I also think about, initiatives that are maybe a little more radical, and that do go out to certain communities and, and do um, and do, like, advocacy work um, you know to, to bring more of those issues to light, and to protect those communities essentially.
P Laz focused on incorporating the environment in social work core values: “If you just added that in there it would make it direct; people would have to stand up for the environment because then it would be a part of the core values.” As a result there would be no choice but to include the environment. Another participant discussed using the environment to create a therapeutic setting for clients. This meant taking individuals to an environment where they are comfortable or using the environment in a creative way. P4 explained:

There’s a project with a CD plant cases and it’s, you grow plants inside a CD case and it teaches people how you all grow with specific needs, you have water to grow, you have to have the certain type of food to grow, you have to be loved to grow, and even just something like that, you’re using the environment.

Incorporating the environment into social work practice was appealing to several participants who did not want to practice social work in a mainstream way. P2 said the following about conventional social work: “When you think social worker . . . I think, and I hope to God this isn’t my life, I think like an office, nine to five, and clients, one, two, three o’clock.” P4 was equally adamant about practicing social work non-traditionally: “When I get out with my degree and go into the workforce, I will be implementing, I will be getting out of an office setting.” It was important for participants to have flexibility in work settings in order to not only practice in a less traditional way, but also to be able to include the environment.

Barriers to incorporating the environment in future social work practice were recognized. First, was the reality of entering the work force. Participants discussed that the environment would be easier to include in some work settings than in others. P11
stated, “If you’re in a hospital setting that’s going to be a lot different than if you’re doing community-based work.” P6 agreed that it would depend on your work setting: “I mean a lot of it depends on the agency and the type of work that you do because, depending on what you are doing, you would bring the environment in different ways.” Other participants realized that including the environment would be non-existent in the work force, such as P3 who said:

I’m sure any agency I get involved in, whether I work in social services, or a non-profit, it’s not going to be about, it’s going to be about clientele and tasks that they’re paying me to do, it’s not going to be about environment.

P1 agreed:

It’s not always an option. My brain always goes back to like child protection just because . . . a lot of the time it’s you sitting at desk doing an 8-hour day, or like, oh social worker in a hospital when do they get to go outside, never.

The inability to include the environment in work settings stems from the second barrier, which is the world-view currently accepted within the social work profession. Recognizing narrow social work practice settings had some participants questioning the perspectives promoted within the social work curriculum that prepare future social workers to practice in a particular way. A few participants critiqued their BSW program. P10 noted a set-up structure in the U of R social work program: “You’re here and these are the options and so you go to the health region, or go to the Ministry, or you go to CBO [community-based organization] and that’s, that’s kind of it.” P6 had a comparable experience stating, “Get on board with what we’re doing and the result is fitting in a box of the agency you are working with.” A participant from FNUC acknowledged that a
limited viewpoint in social work education leads to working in a broken system: “People are getting over-loaded with cases, that it just becomes paperwork to them. They don’t get the relationship with the people you’re working with and it’s just another person on their list” (P4).

Several participants thought there should be an opportunity to include other world-views in social work practice. For the most part, the Indigenous perspective was discussed as an alternate view. P4 stated, “We also need to bring the Indigenous ways of the environment, and, I guess, bring the technology and come together and start working with each other.” P1 said, “Incorporating an environmental approach to social work . . . which I get environmental from an Aboriginal approach, like leads back to wholeness.” As well, a participant stated that social work disregards spirituality as a way of knowing as well as a connection to the environment:

We don’t talk a lot about our own, the world outside of the world, we don’t talk about our spirituality, and what sometimes what stuff happens and we don’t understand it, right, there’s just things out there that can’t be explained (P4).

P4 said that spirituality and creating a connection to the environment could be utilized by social workers to “change the way we work with people.” Similarly, P11 talked about different ways of knowing in terms of the spirituality of connection and having a mutual respect and balance.

By allowing different perspectives P10 stated, “I think it would be interesting because I feel it would open people’s minds up a little bit more, or kind of push people to kind of exploring a different approach to social work practice.” P10 noted that, from her
experience, there is sometimes push-back to new approaches or ways of knowing occurs within the classroom setting:

I feel like sometimes those people that are, like, hey here’s a new approach, here’s a new approach to practice, or thinking about this, a lot of the time it’s kind of, like, oh whatever, like, it doesn’t fall into what’s already been established (P10).

By including the environment in social work education and practice, it could pave the way for new perspectives and approaches to practice.

Overall, the study participants expressed an interest in environmental social work. Participants would be willing to incorporate the environment into future practice if they were educated on the topic and if there was the opportunity. However, it was noted that without the necessary changes to social work curriculum and practice, in addition to a paradigm shift, it was unlikely the environment would be included in any meaningful way within the profession.

Summary

This chapter presented the three emerging categories, namely, knowledge of the environment, lack of professional knowledge, and transforming social work practice. In describing knowledge of the environment, the chapter focused on the participants’ knowledge of the mutual impact between the person and the environment. The chapter then proceeded to outline the link between the environment and social work practice, recognizing that the physical and natural environment is often excluded from social work education and practice. The chapter concluded with ideas for transforming the social
work profession, including incorporating environment in future social work practice and a need for change to social work practice and perspectives.

The next chapter discusses the proposed model for undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment in social work practice. The chapter also discusses the findings of this study with respect to existing literature, its relevance to social work practice, implications for future practice, education and research, and limitations of the study.
Chapter Five: Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore and conceptualize how undergraduate social work students’ acquire an understanding of the environment as it relates to social work practice and what this will mean for their future practice. The simultaneous process of data collection and analysis produced an original model, *Poised for Change*. The model explains undergraduate social work students’ understanding about the environment in relation to social work practice.

The purpose of this chapter is to discuss what has been learned from undergraduate social work students and their understanding of the environment. The chapter is divided into four sections. The first section presents the model *Poised for Change.* The second section discusses the proposed model and findings as they pertain to the existing literature. The third section addresses the implications for social work practice, education, and opportunities for future research. The fourth section examines the limitations of the study. I end the chapter with concluding thoughts about the research study.

Description of the Process Model

In this thesis, undergraduate students describe a process whereby their program of social work appears to be on the threshold or *Poised for Change.* *Figure 1* presents how the participants in this study created an understanding of the environment in social work practice. Undergraduate social work students formulated an understanding of the environment from two approaches knowing personally and knowing professionally. This is visualized in the model as two paths. The paths, labelled *Factors to Understanding,* explain the two approaches.
Figure 1 Poised for Change

This diagram illustrates Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment and its relationship to social work practice.
Knowing personally consists of individual knowledge about the environment and includes being impacted, having a personal connection to the environment, acknowledging different perspectives, and feeling a sense of responsibility. Knowing personally represents what and how participants have learned about the environment through personal experiences and prior education. The participants identified a mutual impact between people and the environment. In addition, many of the study participants described their personal connection to the environment, noting the benefits they experienced due to this connection. An awareness of Indigenous worldviews with respect to the environment was stated by all participants and described specifically in terms of how Indigenous peoples’ values and identity are interconnected with the natural environment while Western belief systems are characterized as not having a high regard for the Earth. These components of mutual impact, personal connection, and differing perspectives prompted feeling a sense of responsibility for the environment.

Knowing professionally consists of a lack of professional knowledge about the environment and includes limited education, overlooking the environment, and being unprepared to include the environment in social work practice. Knowing professionally refers to the participants’ lack of knowledge on how the environment relates to the profession of social work, including how environmental approaches might be integrated into social work practice. For the most part, participants described how their educational learning experiences focused on the environment as a social context. The participants described having limited educational opportunities to learn about the physical and natural environment in their social work education. As a result, there was limited awareness of how the environment might be incorporated in practice. Despite having
personal knowledge and an identified connection to the environment there was difficulty extrapolating how this relationship between social work and the environment might exist and why this was relevant.

Combined, the Factors to Understanding, knowing personally and knowing professionally, explain undergraduate social work students’ Current Understanding of the Environment. The understanding is represented by the oval in the middle of the model. As presented, the possibility of a holistic frame of reference for environmental knowing is impeded by a chasm between the participants’ personal and professional construction of knowledge. As shared by the participants, this is important because having only personal knowledge about environmental issues and concerns creates a gap in knowing how to apply this knowledge to future social work practice. The arrow pointing between the paths represents the disconnect between knowing personally and knowing professionally and how this affects their overall understanding of the environment and its relationship to social work practice.

Even though the participants revealed that they had limited professional understanding about the environment, transforming social work practice to include the environment was conceivable. Transforming Social Work Practice, which consists of rethinking the environment, needing education, and incorporating the environment in social work practice, is labelled on the figure and encapsulated by two circular arrows. Rethinking the environment recognizes the connection between personal well-being and environmental well-being. As a result, participants were open to the possibility that social work practice should include the environment. The participants further highlighted a need for more education in this area. The main venue for this to occur was
identified within social work education and the undergraduate curriculum. Some participants were critical of their social work program, saying that the current curriculum focuses on preparing students to enter practice within established systems and with traditional practice approaches that do not address contemporary issues such as environmental concerns. *Rethinking the environment* and *Needing education*, part of *Transforming Social Work Practice*, are also encompassed within the two circular arrows at the top of the model. They are represented in the figure by two arrows pointing to *Incorporating the environment in social work practice*. These two factors suggest that transformation to include the environment in social work practice will require reframing how the environment is currently viewed within the profession and the knowledge to challenge existing perspectives.

Although barriers were described by the participants, ideas for integrating the environment in social work practice were expressed. *Incorporating the environment in social work practice* is labelled in a rectangle at the top of the model and is also part of *Transforming Social Work Practice*. The barriers, *Entering the work-force* and *Paradigm shift*, are depicted by two ovals within the rectangle of *Incorporating the environment in social work practice*. The participants shared that these existing barriers would impede the process for including the environment in social work practice. The first barrier is the reality of entering the work force. The participants expressed that most social work positions do not formally include the environment or consider the environment as part of practice. The second barrier is the need for a major paradigm shift of social work beliefs and values. This shift would recognize the importance of the environment and the relationship between personal well-being and environmental well-
being. To conclude, the model suggests that the participants’ understanding of the environment includes a call to action for the inclusion of the environment in social work practice.

**Key Findings**

Various aspects of the model fit with what has been indicated in other research. In situating the findings of my study within the existing literature, many concepts and conceptual linkages are supported in the literature.

The findings of this thesis indicate that the social work students who participated in the study have knowledge of environmental concerns and issues. For example, issues such as water and air pollution, climate change, deforestation, melting of the Arctic, and pipelines were discussed, which are the same issues prevalent in the literature (Coates, 2005; Dominelli, 2014; Norton, 2012). The mutual impact between person and the environment was also discussed which recognizes the interdependence between humans and the environment. Participants explained that knowledge of environmental issues and awareness of the mutual impact between person and the environment mainly came from personal knowledge and experiences rather than formal social work education.

Understanding the interconnectedness between person and the environment, along with knowledge of environmental issues and concerns, is important because it can lead to the inclusion of the environment in social work practice (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Coates, 2004; Coates et al., 2006; Coates & Gray, 2012, Lysack, 2009). Social workers must be able to link environmental problems to the kinds of issues with which social workers are involved in order to expand the scope for social work practice. Recognizing the relationship between people and the environment is a starting point.
In addition, a personal connection to the environment and how the environment is beneficial to personal well-being was described by all the participants regardless of whether or not they had an interest in the environment. In the literature, a select number of academics place importance on social workers being able to discover their own connection to the environment (Besthorn & Saleebey, 2003; Coates, 2003; Lysack 2009, 2010b). According to the literature, this is where social work should start to be able to link social work practice to the environment. Coates (2003) states, “Perhaps the most important part of social work education will be a process of self-exploration regarding one’s own beliefs, values and lifestyle” (p. 137). He goes on to explain that the first step which makes individuals become committed to and take action for social transformation is personal transformation. Personal connection is essential because it will have an effect on whether humans take action to safeguard the environment. Individuals must feel connected to the environment in order to protect it (Lysack, 2010b). In this study, the personal connection described by the participants provided an understanding of how the environment could be integrated into social work practice to assist clients. For example, knowing that individuals can be emotionally affected by the environment social workers who are aware of environmental issues can offer support if needed.

By reflecting on their own personal connection to the environment, participants identified that some cultures place value on the environment, specifically discussing Indigenous perspectives. Participants learned about Indigenous perspectives from prior educational experiences and some social work courses, although stated that the focus was mainly on cultural awareness. Hence, while the findings note that Indigenous perspectives, including the importance of the environment, are present in social work
curriculum, there is no consideration for how this perspective can be used in social work practice. However, the literature contends that Indigenous ways of knowing centring on the balance between individuals and the environment, “have been shown to provide innovations and meaningful insights as to ways in which to respond to the challenges facing the world, including the current ecological crisis” (Coates, et al., 2006, p. 395). The findings indicate that more can be done to implement Indigenous approaches within social work practice.

Despite personal knowledge of environmental issues and recognizing the mutual impact between person and the environment this research thesis highlights that the environment is not viewed by social work students as an integral aspect of social work practice. This finding is consistent with the theorizing of other scholars (Coates, 2003; Coates & Gray, 2012; Norton, 2012; Zapf, 2010) who state the environment needs to be more prominent in social work practice. However, participants indicated that social work is mostly about people. Contributing to this belief is the limited scope of PIE, criticized for a narrow viewpoint of environment in social work practice (Besthorn, 2013; Besthorn & Meyer, 2010; Green & McDermont, 2010; Kemp, 2011; Norton, 2012).

In addition, the findings reveal there is a disconnect between personal knowledge of the environment and professional knowledge of the environment. This is similar to a study conducted by Crawford et al. (2015), where research participants understood environmental issues but could not recognize the relevance to social work practice. While the literature states that current and future social workers must understand and respond to the effects of the environmental crisis (Besthorn, 2004; Coates, 2005; Coates
& Grey, 2012; Dominelli, 2012; Hawkins, 2010; Miller et al., 2012; Tester, 2013), this study reveals that current undergraduate social work students have not been educated on the environment and what this means for practice. Therefore, undergraduate social work students, as future practitioners, are unprepared to include the environment in social work practice at this time.

Even though the findings indicate there is a lack of professional knowledge about how to include the environment in social work practice, transforming social work practice to include the environment is plausible. The findings suggest that social work students are ready to practice social work differently. This includes an interest and desire to include the environment in practice, which is what the literature is calling for (Besthorn, 2003; Coates, 2003, 2005; Coates & Gray, 2012; Dominelli, 2014; Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Norton, 2012; van Wormer et al., 2007; Zapf 2009, 2010). As Crawford et al. (2015) states, “The topic is making a transition from being on the margins of social work to becoming mainstream” and “the incorporation of environmental sustainability into practice is at the threshold stage of development” (p. 586).

Accordingly, the findings suggest undergraduate social work students are starting to rethink the relationship between social work and the environment and there was some basis for understanding that social issues and environmental issues intersect. A few participants noted that, for the most part, social and environmental issues are compartmentalized and thought of as separate issues that need to be solved. One participant recognized that these issues “have a ripple effect and everything criss-crosses” (P8). However, this awareness was very limited within the study. Nonetheless,
it is significant as the literature establishes that if social workers are going to uphold ethical responsibilities, then environmental issues must be recognized as one and the same as social justice and human rights issues (Coates, 2004; Hawkins, 2010; Jones, 2013, Miller et al., 2012). The literature appeals for a change to the traditional thinking of social justice and human rights (Besthorn, 2012; Hawkins, 2012; Miller et al., 2012). For example, Besthorn (2012) states that both social and environmental justice are intertwined and states that all beings, human and non-human, along with the Earth, have the same intrinsic value. While the findings indicate that undergraduate social work students are not at this advanced level of awareness new ideas about the environment are beginning to surface.

In order to increase awareness about the environment and its relationship to social work practice the findings indicate that education is needed. There was unanimous agreement from the participants that social work students require education about social work and the environment, especially if it is to be included in future practice. A study by Marlow and van Rooyen (2001) concluded that social workers are more likely to include the environment in social work practice if they are educated on the topic. Furthermore, the academic literature urges including the environment in social work education (Besthorn & Canda, 2002; Gray & Coates, 2015; Hayward et al., 2013; Jones, 2013; Kaiser et al., 2015; Melekis & Woodhouse, 2015; Teixeira & Krings, 2015). Currently, the participants identified that information about the environment in social work curriculum is virtually non-existent.

Where this research study contributes to the literature is presenting ideas on how the environment could be implemented in social work education from the perspective of
undergraduate social work students. Ideally participants recommended having a specific course on social work and the environment. Other ideas such as incorporating environmental issues in social work classes or as professional development opportunities, learning from other disciplines (i.e. biology, agriculture), and volunteering for the environment to be counted as course credits were proposed. Remarkably, the ideas are achievable and, aside from the suggestion to create a class on the environment, it appears many could be included in the undergraduate social work curriculum without much modification to course content. Teixiera and Krings (2015) support the participants’ ideas suggesting that any current social work program can adapt its curriculum to ensure that social work students are educated on the environment.

However, the findings revealed barriers to including the environment in social work practice. The first barrier was entering the workforce. Participants noted that including the environment in social work practice would be dependent on work settings with some settings being more flexible to allow for the inclusion of the environment. However, mostly there was agreement that social work positions do not include the environment and that social workers are paid to do tasks as determined by their employer. The literature, primarily conceptual and theoretical in nature, (Molyneux, 2010) had not identified this concern previously. Additionally, current social work programs were critiqued for preparing future social workers to practice in a limited way, which, at the present time, does not include the environment. This can limit the types of positions that future social workers aspire to with one participant mentioning that their social work program largely promotes health care, social services, and community based organizations as future employment opportunities. The problem with this as Kemp
(2011) contends is that, “Other professions are taking the lead in domains in which social work skills and values are sorely needed, and in which social work has longstanding expertise” (p. 1205). With the literature confirming that environmental issues disproportionately affects individuals who are marginalized and vulnerable, (Hetherington & Boddy, 2013; Tester, 2013) social work needs to utilize their specific skill set such as networking, collaborating, advocacy, and community-building to address environmental issues (Jones, 2013).

The second barrier identified in the findings is a paradigm shift. Ultimately, the literature states that a considerable paradigm shift is needed, both in present-day social work beliefs and values and in the social work curriculum, in order to include the environment in practice (Besthorn & McMillen, 2002; Besthorn et al., 2010; Norton, 2012; Zapf 2009, 2010). This shift requires recognition of the importance of the environment and the interdependence of personal and environmental well-being, with the realization that social work must be responsive in protecting and caring for the Earth. The findings suggest that changing social work core values and beliefs is possible which are subsequently discussed.

To start, some participants questioned modernity, the current world-view accepted within mainstream social work. It was asserted that a narrow viewpoint in social work education leads to working in a broken system. A major criticism in the literature is of social work aligning itself with modernism, ascribing the environmental crisis to this worldview (Besthorn, 2004; Coates, 2003, 2005; Coates, et al., 2006; Zapf, 2010). The literature implores social work to examine its acceptance of modernity’s beliefs and values and their influence on social work practice (Coates, 2005; Tester
In addition, this study suggests that undergraduate social work students are interested in different ways of knowing. Several participants thought there should be an opportunity to include other perspectives in social work. Primarily Indigenous perspectives and spirituality were mentioned. It was noted that different viewpoints could change the way social workers work with people. The literature depicts other perspectives such as, deep ecology (Besthorn & Canda, 2002), green social work (Dominelli, 2012), ecosocial perspective (Norton, 2012), ecofeminism (Besthorn & McMillen, 2003), and people as place (Zapf, 2009, 2010) which provide more holistic frameworks of including humans, non-humans, and the environment. While participants were not aware of these viewpoints, being open to different ways of knowing is important because again, it can influence the profession to change its values and belief system, further contributing to the aforementioned paradigm shift.

Although, there are hurdles to transforming social work practice, participants were able to think of ways to incorporate the environment in social work practice. For example, some participants suggested community groups and programming that could address environmental issues. Other ideas included a more radical approach such as protesting and advocating. One participant planned to use the environment to create a therapeutic setting for clients while another thought changes should be made to social work core values to explicitly include advocacy for the environment. These suggestions provide concrete ideas that contribute to the practicality of environmental social work.
It is worth noting that, while not explicitly part of the research study, including the environment in social work education and practice is necessary if the profession plans to be involved with contemporary issues. Specifically, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) found that from an Aboriginal perspective reconciliation between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians requires reconciliation with the natural world otherwise reconciliation remains incomplete. This correlates with the vision of the Idle No More Movement, which “revolves around Indigenous ways of knowing rooted in Indigenous sovereignty to protect water, air, land and all creation for future generations” (Idle No More, 2013). Furthermore, a key objective of the University of Regina’s strategic plan focuses on Indigenizing the university and implementing initiatives to support the success of Aboriginal students, faculty, and staff. Part of this process is Academic Indigenizing, referring “to the transformation of academic programs with an aim of both re-centering Indigenous content, epistemology and pedagogy and through academic program decolonization” (Office of the President, 2018, “Academic Indigenization”, para. 1).

In this example, the model, Poised for Change demonstrates its applicability whereby undergraduate social work students have identified the mutual impact between person and the environment with some understanding that social and environmental issues intersect. Indigenous perspectives were noted for valuing a reciprocal relationship with the environment and recognition that the current worldview is a barrier to addressing environmental issues. However, professionally a gap exists for current undergraduate social work students to include the environment in future social work
practice. The model highlights a need for more education to include environment in practice in order to fully participate in such issues such as reconciliation.

Overall, this study contributed to the environmental social work discourse by providing ideas, beliefs, and opinions about the environment from Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students. The study also adds to the practical reality of environmental social work by providing tangible ways to incorporate the environment in both social work education and practice, which has been lacking (Molyneux, 2010). The study highlights a gap between personal knowing about the environment and professional knowing about the environment which indicates more needs to be done to include the environment in social work curriculum and practice.

To conclude, participants were from different generational cohorts and not everyone expressed an interest in the environment prior to participating in the study. Yet, all concluded that the environment should be integrated into social work practice. This is congruent with other studies where similar results have been reported (Crawford et al., 2015; Miller & Hayward, 2015; Nesmith & Smyth, 2015). It can be inferred from the study findings that social work students no longer want to accept the status quo in regards to social work curriculum and practice and are, as the model suggests, poised for change.

**Implications**

Based on the findings, this study has implications for social work practice and education as well as further research in the area of environmental social work.

**Social work practice.** The study highlights the need for social work to expand its scope of practice to include the environment. It appears social work, keen to establish
itself as a credible profession, developed the PIE framework, which has subsequently limited its scope of practice. The study indicates that now undergraduate social work students are critiquing their social work programs for preparing them to practice in a limited way and no longer want to accept the status quo when it comes to future social work practice.

The study provides an opportunity for social work to return to its philosophical and practice roots for guidance, namely the evolution of charity organization societies and settlement houses, whereby the environment, not the individual, was the focus of change (van Wormer et al., 2007). Social work, known for skills such as advocacy, communication, collaboration, community-building, and networking should be using its skill set to be at the forefront of developing and implementing policies to address environmental concerns and the related consequences, not merely working within already existing policies that do not appear to be challenging the current situation. In addition, social work should be involved in and creating research opportunities that can add to policy design and implementation, not relying on other disciplines to produce results to draw from.

A call was made for changes to the social work paradigm over fifteen years ago. Despite this social work has not been inspired to take action. With the intersection of social justice and environmental justice issues, social work should be utilizing other frameworks to respond to the established environmental crisis. If social work truly wants to tout itself as the premier profession dedicated to human rights and social justice, it must challenge existing frameworks and practice areas as well as include advocacy for the environment. Social work is missing the opportunity to be a part of major changes,
both socially and environmentally. This is an exciting time for the profession to transform its scope of practice and be more visible in addressing environmental issues.

**Social work education.** This study highlights that there is a dearth of information being provided about the physical and natural environment in current social work curriculum. The study indicates it will be difficult for social work students to enter the work force and practice environmental social work without education. As well, it demonstrates that undergraduate social work students in Saskatchewan are interested in learning about environmental social work and should be provided with opportunities to do so.

Therefore, a change to current social work curriculum is required. Course content should be developed that educates undergraduate social work students on the environment and how to incorporate the environment in future practice. It will also be necessary for social work educators to be aware of this topic. Based on the limited material about the environment in current social work curriculum it appears social work educators do not have a lot of knowledge about this topic and will also need to be educated.

Undergraduate social work students had ideas for more immediate inclusion of the environment in social work curriculum. Developing a class on social work and the environment, having the environment included in current course content, and being able to access programming from other disciplines to learn about the environment were presented. Additionally, volunteering or completing a practicum in an environmental area was proposed.
However, more permanent changes to social work curriculum will require an evaluation of social work programs as well as social work program accreditation guidelines to fully ensure social workers are prepared to address environmental issues in future practice. Currently, the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) (2014) Standards for Accreditation state, “The BSW curriculum equips students with knowledge in the humanities and relevant social sciences, including knowledge related to human development and human behaviour in the social environment” (p. 13). While the standards also state that social work programs have flexibility to deliver programs that are unique and respond to specific socio-cultural and political-economic contexts (Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE), 2014), it is clear that the focus of social work education remains on the social environment with disregard for the impact of environmental issues and the role for social work to address such issues in future practice.

**Further research.** Further research can be conducted to further expand upon what this study has achieved. This qualitative study considered a broad question within a specific geographic area whereas environmental social work is a wide-ranging topic.

Additional opportunities for research include learning about undergraduate social work students understanding about the environment in other geographical locations, and investigating differences or similarities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous social work programs. As well, examining social work educators’ knowledge about the environment and whether attempts are made to include the environment in social work curriculum in addition to, exploration of social work programs across Canada and/or
accreditation guidelines for the inclusion of the environment in social work education would add to the knowledge base.

Also, the categories and concepts developed in this study and the proposed relationship amongst them, potentially serve as variables for further studies. For example, how can a personal connection to the environment be utilized in social work practice, or how can the gap between personal knowing about the environment and professional knowing about the environment be addressed.

**Limitations**

There are several identified limitations to the study. The data analysis produced an original model for Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment in social work practice. The model is co-created from the collective voices of the participants and my interpretation of the data based on my knowledge, skills, and experience as a new researcher. Therefore, the findings are situated in a time and place and provide one interpretation from among many possible interpretations of the data (Charmaz, 2014).

Solely Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students registered in an accredited BSW or BISW program were included in this study. While attempts were made to recruit a wide-range of participants, there were some geographical areas in the province that were under-represented. As well, it was not the intent of this study to compare the BSW and BISW programs, it would be interesting to compare students’ environmental understanding based on their social work program.

While the aspiration of any grounded theory study should be on theory-building consideration must be given to the practical realities of research (Timonen, Foley, &
Conlon, 2018). In this case, I was a neophyte researcher developing interviewing, data collection, and analysis skills as the study progressed. In addition, as a graduate student I was restricted to completing the study within program required timelines.

As a final point, this study did not result in a formal grounded theory. A formal theory is developed to a higher conceptual level and has applicability across a number of substantive areas due to their higher level of abstraction and generalization of concepts (Charmaz, 2014). Rather, the focus of this qualitative study was exploratory and was not conducted to find an objective truth. Applying the comparative methods in a reflexive mode and emphasizing the constructivism of grounded theory brings the researcher into the research situation and process of inquiry, thereby limiting the objectionist foundations of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014). The categories and concepts that emerged from the joint process of data collection and analysis resulted in interesting and important beginning themes about undergraduate social work students and the environment. According to Timonen, Foley, and Conlon (2018) significant progress toward constructing categories and identifying links between them, with the intent to achieve conceptual clarity is a sufficient outcome for a grounded theory study.

**Concluding Thoughts**

This study aimed to address the research question of “What is Saskatchewan undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment? The findings that emerged from the data answer the research question and are consistent with the current body of knowledge in the area of environmental social work. It was my intention for this research to contribute to the area of environmental social work by adding knowledge and practical applicability to the environmental social work discourse.
In my social work practice, I am discovering that any changes professionally have to be accompanied by changes personally. It would be nearly impossible to practice environmental social work without profound personal changes. To date, my biggest personal change is how much I consume and the refusal to participate in the current consumer culture of acquiring stuff to prove my success, worth, and happiness. Professionally, it is more difficult. First, I am still learning about this area and, second, there is not a lot of support within human service organizations or direction on how to practice environmental social work. Going forward, I will continue with my education and use my knowledge to educate others. This will include advocating for the inclusion of the environment in social work with the intent that environmental social work becomes an integral component of holistic social work practice.
References


Lysack, M. (2010b). Practices and skills or building social and ecological resiliency with individuals and communities. In S. Hick, H. I. Peters, T. Corner, & T. London (Eds.), Structural social work in action (pp. 211-228). Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholars’ Press Inc.


PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR
RESEARCH ON THE ENVIRONMENT AND SOCIAL WORK

Are you an undergraduate social work student currently enrolled in an accredited social work degree program in Saskatchewan? Are you interested in volunteering in a research study on the role of the environment in social work practice?

If so, you will be asked to meet for an individual interview of approximately 60 to 90 minutes.

The purpose of this study is to explore undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the environment, environmental issues and their relationship to social work practice.

For more information, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Kristy Kominetsky
xxx-xxx-xxxx
kaminetk@uregina.ca

In appreciation for your time, you will receive a $20 honorarium.

This study has been reviewed and received approval through the Research Ethics Board, University of Regina. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 1-306-585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca
Appendix B

Consent Form

University of Regina
Department of Social Work

Project Title: Undergraduate Social Work Students’ Understanding of Environment in Social Work Practice

Researcher: Kristy Kominetsky, Graduate Student, Faculty of Graduate Studies, University of Regina, xxx-xxx-xxxx, kaminetk@uregina.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Darlene Chalmers, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Social Work, University of Regina, 306-664-7379, darlene.chalmers@uregina.ca

Purpose(s) and Objective(s) of the Research:
The physical environment is, for the most part absent in social work practice. This limited view of environment is preventing social work from identifying and responding to deteriorating ecological systems. A developing area, referred to as environmental social work or ecosocial work is appealing to the profession of social work to consider the impact of changes to the Earth’s environment and its effect on all living species.

The purpose of this study is to explore undergraduate social work students’ understanding of the physical environment, including environmental issues and their relationship to social work practice. This includes examining what students perceive as needed preparation for their future role as practitioners in addressing environmental concerns and how this can best be achieved in their undergraduate social work education.

To achieve this purpose, this study will investigate the beliefs and ideas that Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) and Bachelor of Indigenous Social Work (BISW) students in Saskatchewan have about the environment. This study will build upon established groundwork for changes to social work curriculum in the BSW and Master of Social Work (MSW) programs to include environmental issues and concerns, as well as the interconnection between human and planetary well-being. This understanding may also contribute to the area of environmental social work by creating a transformation in social work practice and adding to an emerging paradigm shift in social work beliefs and values.

The data collected from the interview will be included in the MSW thesis being completed by the researcher for the requirements of a MSW degree and/or publications to come from this research.

Procedures:
Participation in this study is voluntary and participants may stop participating in the study at any time. It will involve a face to face interview between 60 – 90 minutes in length to take place in a mutually agreed upon location. The interview will be audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. You will be provided with a copy of the transcript to review and add, alter or delete information from the transcript that you see fit. Please feel free to ask any questions regarding the procedures and goals of the study or your role at any time.
Potential Risks:
There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. There are no known or anticipated risks by participating in this study. However, if a participant needs help dealing with issues raised during the interview, a resource list with contact information for a variety of telephone crisis resources that offer services at no cost will be provided. If participants are seeking counselling supports beyond these services where a cost may be incurred, the cost will be borne by the participants themselves.

Potential Benefits:
There is no personal benefit to participating in the research study. An overarching benefit to participating in this study is that it will lead to the advancement of knowledge in the study area and will add new information to the profession of social work.

Compensation:
Research participants will be provided with a $20.00 honorarium for their time and effort participating in the study. Compensation will be provided even if the participant withdraws from the study.

Confidentiality:
The information shared in the interview will remain strictly confidential. Confidentiality means that the researcher will not disclose any identifiable information about the participant. Once the interview has been transcribed a code and/or pseudonym will be assigned. No personally identifying information will be used in the research study. Direct quotations will be used in the final report. Identifying information such as consent forms and master list will be stored in a locked file cabinet separate from the data collected. The master list will be destroyed when data collection is complete and it is no longer required. The data collected will only be used for the purpose of completing the research study.

I will choose my own pseudonym: ___ Yes ___ No

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: ______________________

The researcher can choose a pseudonym for me: ___ Yes ___ No

Storage of Data:
Interviews will be transcribed verbatim as soon as possible after the interview and audio recordings will be deleted from the recording device. The interviews will be saved on a password protected computer that only the researcher has access to. Any hard copies of the transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the Supervisor’s office at the university. Only the researcher, the thesis supervisor and committee members will have access to the raw data. The data will be stored for a minimum period of five years post publication.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation is voluntary and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason, at any time without explanation or penalty of any sort by advising the researcher. Should you wish to withdraw from this research study any data you have contributed will be deleted and destroyed.
Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply up until two months after your interview occurs. After this date, it is possible that some results have been analyzed, written up and/or presented and it may not be possible to withdraw your data.

**Follow up:**

To obtain results from the study, please contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.

**Questions or Concerns:**

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the researcher using the information at the top of page 1.

This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the U of R Research Ethics Board. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the committee at 1-306-585-4775 or research.ethics@uregina.ca. Out of town participants may call collect.

**Consent:**

**SIGNED CONSENT**

Your signature below indicates that the research study and contents of the Consent Form have been read and explained to me and I understand the contents. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to being audio-recorded. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

____________________      ______________________ __________________
Name of Participant           Signature              Date

___________________________      _______________________
Researcher’s Signature                  Date

* A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*
Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

1. How do you define environment in social work practice?
2. What do you know about environmental or ecosocial work?
3. What is your understanding of how the environment is included in social work practice?
4. Discuss any environmental concerns or issues that you are aware of or understand.
5. How do you think that the physical environment, including environmental issues/concerns, affects people and communities?
6. What do you think is the relationship between social work practice and the environment?
7. What is needed as preparation for your future role as a social worker in addressing environmental concerns?
   a. Sub question: What is needed for you to include the physical and natural environment in your social work practice?
8. How can this be achieved in undergraduate studies?
9. If you were to include the environment in your future social work practice, how would you do this?
10. Is there something that you might not have thought about before we started that occurred to you during this interview?
11. Is there anything else that you want to add?
### Appendix D

#### Demographics of Research Participants

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