Equal Right to Breathe:

Exploring Deep Ecology Solutions to Environmental Racism in Kansas City, Kansas

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Abstract
This paper explores how shallow and deep ecology platforms can build solutions to environmental racism in Kansas City, Kansas (KCK). It specifically focuses on the Quindaro and the Argentine neighborhoods, which suffer the most environmental degradation in the entire Kansas City metro area. However, KCK is rich in strengths and resources that can improve its residents' quality of life. The paper will identify these barriers and strengths in order to find ways residents may take action to improve their health and that of the environment. Deep ecology theory explains why it is profoundly important for person and natural environment to connect in order for both to thrive.

First this paper will explain the term environmental justice and the development of the term "environmental racism" within the movement. It will then relate the focus areas' significant history and present condition to these concepts. Segregation and racism have contributed to structural and environmental degradation in KCK, specifically due to industrial pollution and train traffic. This degradation may inhibit residents' ability to connect with nature. It will critique deep and shallow ecology theory and suggest solutions characteristic of both. A healthier community can evolve with assessment, community engagement, and education. From a social work perspective, meeting residents' health needs, defined by shallow and social ecology values, will be more easily attainable before developing deep ecological initiatives.

Keywords: environmental justice, environmental racism, health, pollution, deep ecology

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to Environmental Racism in Kansas City, KS

The link between two KCK neighborhoods populated by a high number of minorities and their surrounding environmental degradation may be linked to environmental racism. Arnie Naess' deep and shallow ecology concepts provide theoretical platforms to create positive change for KCK residents and their natural environment. First, definitions of the environmental justice movement and environmental racism will be explored. The paper will then contextualize the area's present issues with its history and describe the strengths and barriers of Quindaro and Argentine.

Shallow and deep ecology ideals will be applied and critiqued to create potential solutions in this context.

Environmental justice (EJ) has been defined and redefined since the term's emergence in the 1980s. However, it generally refers to the "belief that all citizens, regardless of ethnicity or socioeconomic class, should equally share in the benefits of environmental amenities and the burdens of environmental health hazards" (University of Washington School of Public Health [UWSPH], 2006). Most definitions have common "themes" of justice in distribution, procedures, and process (Pijawka et al. 1998 & Collins 1992). Environmental racism is more specific; it is when low-income rural, people of color, Native American, working class, and ethnic communities are disproportionately victimized by polluting industries (2006). Minorities are especially vulnerable because they are perceived to have less power to fight back against pollution in order to survive economically. It has a foundation in the Civil Rights movement, and frames institutional racism as a causation to environmental inequities (2006). The Civil Rights movement empowered communities of color and their allies to fight for environmental justice.

Thus EJ not only encapsulates our natural landscape, but also the places where we "live, work, play, and pray; it is the environment of the everyday" (Taylor, 2000, p. 508). EJ has no universal definition; it is based in place, time, and perspective. Environmental justice movements can vary in anthropocentrism, and draw from both deep and shallow ecology theory. Deep ecology emphasizes the equal, inherent worth and interconnectedness of all life. It is also concerned with nature's ability to nourish and expand the human spirit (Naess, 1973). Its tenets as described by LaChapelle (1988) indicate the intrinsic value of nature's "diversity, interdependency, and complexity… [and furthermore that] humanity is a part of nature with extraordinary power, which puts us in a position of great responsibility toward all species" (Canda et al., 2012, p. 45). The fight for healthy communities in Quindaro and Argentine are still rooted in shallow ecology ethics; it is difficult for a community to sink into deeper ecological action when their basic health needs are not met. But, as one of deep ecology's founding theorists Arne Naess notes, it is important not to turn against shallow ecology movements, but to encourage further ecocentric reform (Cramer, 1998).

Most environmental justice movements, including the ones in KCK, are anthropocentric and based on shallow ecology principles. UWSPH (2006) frames EJ this way, breaking it down

into three categories: distributional, procedural, and process justice. Distributional justice refers to spacing environmental benefits and burdens fairly. Procedural justice is the “equal protection from environmental hazards regarding rulemaking and enforcement” (2006). Finally, process justice refers to “providing the opportunity for meaningful citizen involvement in decisions that affect environmental health, including access to information and adequate authority for local knowledge” (2006). Following an outline of KCK contextual history, the paper will explore implications for social work practice in KCK from both anthropocentric and ecocentric standpoints and suggest solutions to meet both needs.

Quindaro and Argentine live on opposite edges of KCK’s downtown. They were both established in the latter half of the nineteenth century, and both are located on the river basin where the Missouri and Kansas Rivers meet. Argentine’s land was first settled by the Shawnee, Delaware, and Kansa tribes; Quindaro’s by the Wyandot (Eichoff, 2006). Argentine grew from industrial manufacturing, and later the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway. Quindaro was initially founded as the only Underground Railroad port along the Missouri River (2006). Freed slaves later settled on the bluffs above the port after Kansas joined the Union in 1860. Although they have vastly different pasts, both towns make up the oldest and most diverse areas of KCK.

By the end of the century, Quindaro had evolved into a flourishing, predominantly African American settlement. During this time Western University was established—the first black university west of the Mississippi river (Hightower, n.d.). Argentine also took form at the tail end of the Civil War. In the late 1800s, it was originally known for its lumberyard and silver smelter. Santa Fe Railway was built through the northern edge of Argentine at the turn of the century, and would become the town’s major industry. According to the “2015 Report from Year Long Diesel Monitoring” published by grass-roots organization Global Community Monitor, Warren Buffett’s Berkshire Hathaway now owns more than 390 railroads that comprise the Burlington Northern and Santa Fe Railway (BNSF). The 2015 report claims that an average of 220,000 railcars are on the 32,000 miles of BNSF track every moment. The Argentine rail yard is the largest yard in the BNSF system, and the second largest in the entire United States. It is configured as a central hub with 60 sorting tracks and a large diesel garage. A train passes through the railway approximately every two minutes (2015).

The Quindaro neighborhood is more protected from the Argentine rail-yards to the east, but the area has its own issues. It is centered in the industrial corridor along the Missouri and Kansas rivers and "surrounded by chemical manufacturers, electrical power plants, cement factories, wastewater treatment plants, and EPA-permitted facilities that impact both the air and water quality of the community" (Sierra Club, 2013). Until April 2015, Quindaro housed the Quindaro Power Station—a 239-megawatt coal-fired power station within walking distance of most Quindaro residents. After a lawsuit threatened by the Kansas Sierra Club, the Board of Public Utilities retired the plant and invested $750,000 in energy-efficiency programs (2013). The Sierra Club alleged that the plant exceeded levels allowed by the Clean Air Act. KCK's next census will determine if statistics of asthma and deaths in Quindaro have declined after the plant's closure.

Although both neighborhoods are KCK's most historic and diverse, they are also the most polluted, impoverished, and experience the highest amount of lung-related diseases. In 2010, the KCK metropolitan area's population was approximately 50% White, 27% Black or African American, and 28% Hispanic. It is also the poorest city in the KC metropolitan area: over 28% of residents live below the poverty level (GCM, 2015). The map in GCM's diesel fuel report shows the highest number of minority residents encircling the BNSF rail yard and Quindaro Power Station. Because of the areas' high poverty rates and pollution, their residents are vulnerable. According to the Kansas Sierra Club (2013), African American children are disproportionally affected by indoor and outdoor air pollution than children of any other racial and ethnic group. Asthma rates are 131 per 1,000 for non-Hispanic African American children, compared to 91 per 1,000 for all groups and 81 per 1,000 whites (2013). These statistics can reflect the effects of environmental degradation in neighborhoods with a higher percentage of residents from minority groups. These illnesses can affect their economic mobility, family life, and school absences due to illness, which further hinder children's development. These anthropocentric basic needs are the focus of the communities involved in KCK environmental justice work. Their fight for clean air, natural landscapes, and equal distribution of resources is classified as shallow ecology. It is the first step towards deeper ecological change.

Although both neighborhoods confront barriers to health and sustainable infrastructure, their communities are strong. Deep ecology theory encourages the use of local knowledge and to create change (Drengson, 1997). Strong cultural and religious groups, non-profit organizations,

and families have already come together to demand the equal right to breathe, let alone thrive. These include the efforts of local non-profits in Argentine, like the Good Neighbor Committee, Global Community Monitor, the Diesel Health Project, and the Kansas Sierra Club. These organizations are made up of local community members. GCM and Diesel Health Project members united and trained fellow residents to install air quality monitors in order to back up their cry for railway reform. They also hosted community forums to inform residents about diesel emissions' health risks. Kansas Sierra Club won a lawsuit against BPU to reduce coal plant emissions in Quindaro. These grassroots actions are steps towards healthier communities and clean air. Although they are based on people-centered, shallow ecology platforms, they are the first step towards fundamental change. Collective action to ensure distributional, procedural, and process environmental justice paves a way for deep ecological movements.

Deep ecology is a comprehensive philosophical worldview that can be applied to promote sociocultural change (Cramer, 1998, p. 10). If the feeling of interconnectedness is lost or buried by urban sprawl or the struggle for economic survival, desiring deep ecological change can be nearly impossible. It starts with the ability to meet basic needs. Programming that promotes healthy living and our connection to nature could help improve community members' quality of life at a deeper level. Reconnecting residents to their own cultural traditions and knowledge, or "ecosophies" (Drengson, 1997) that may have been lost through time could also bring about fundamental, ecological change. However, Argentine activist and resident Leticia DeCaigny describes the difficulty of utilizing well-known outdoor traditions amidst pollution:

My neighbor used to have a garden by the rail yard . . . there's a big green patch near there that we once wanted to use as a community garden. But after we tested the levels of soil and air pollution there, it was obvious that eating what we grow could pose some serious health risks over time. (L. DeCaigny, personal communication, September 21, 2016)

This is where the implications for social work come into play. By working with community members in Quindaro and Argentine, social workers can work towards overlapping shallow and deep ecology theory goals. Both legislative pressure and community programming can be implemented to achieve them.

With the support of local legislators and the grassroots organizations discussed previously in this paper, more pressure can be put on Berkshire Hathaway to reduce diesel emissions. This

pressure takes on a shallow ecological quality by focusing on health risks in Argentine, but it also achieves a deeper goal—cleaner air for all living species. Less diesel emissions would give residents the ability to thrive—from regaining their sense of taste and smell, to less health care debt and economic mobility. It would also be healthier for the natural environment, which is just as important according to deep ecology theory. Humans are not separate from nature, although it may feel that way if people are cut off from it (Naess, 1973, p. 95).

More access to nature and healthy living resources could improve the quality of life in Quindaro. Social workers and residents can encourage local organizations like the YMCA and the KCK NAACP to head healthy living and outdoor programming for youth and adults. The YMCA near Quindaro already offers income-based programs for chronic disease prevention and management, nutrition, and youth leadership. Part of this includes their on-site community garden. However, most of these programs happen inside, and none focus on cultural traditions, thus leaving most tenets of deep ecology behind. The only parks in the Quindaro neighborhood area are the Quindaro Ruins and Kaw Point on the confluence of the Missouri and Kansas rivers. More natural landscapes and park-scapes could encourage residents to enjoy the outdoors. After Kaw Point was established, a diversity of community members began fishing at the river's edge and using the short walking trail. More park space could provide a deeper connection to nature provide a space for exercise or community gatherings.

Further programming like California-based Outdoor Afro could also reconnect residents to nature and instill a personal responsibility to protect the environment. Outdoor Afro's mission is to reconnect African-Americans to the outdoors. It uses social media and volunteers to organize outdoor activities—like camping, biking, hiking, and birding—for African Americans all over the country. For many African Americans, especially from older generations, being outside can be a safety concern. Washington D.C. Outdoor Afro leader Autumn Saxton-Ross explained that growing up, her grandmother used to take her to Watermelon Hill in Kansas City, Missiouri's Swope Park. Until desegregation, it was the only place in the park that black people were allowed to visit. With that history in mind, Saxon-Ross' grandmother would not take her to other parts of the park, even in the 1980s, long after segregation had ended. The fear lingered. (Meraji, 2015).

This uneasiness contributes to the view that people of color do not engage in nature or environmental justice as much as white people. However, programs like Outdoor Afro can

challenge this stereotype. Excursion leaders are trained to reinforce their connection to the outdoors by telling stories of black history. For example, abolitionist and Underground Railroad hero Harriet Tubman was a naturalist who understood waterways, astronomy, herbal medicine, and geography (Meraji, 2015). For the founder of Outdoor Afro, Rue Mapp, "getting people outside and enjoying fresh air is the first and more important step in reconnecting people of color to those bigger outdoor spaces, and in helping them realize that those places are, in fact, for everyone" (2015). Naess emphasizes the most crucial step in deep ecology action is this sense of connection and belonging to nature that Outdoor Afro promotes.

KCK could utilize Outdoor Afro to establish a local group with support from the EJ-focused NAACP president, Richard Mabion, and other organizers. Van transportation to nearby nature reserves could be provided for free by Kansas City Kansas Community College (KCKCC), especially if students from the college participated in the programming. It could even qualify as a student organization, and Student Senate would provide a yearly budget for longer or more distant outdoor excursions. A generation who feels a sense of belonging, familiarity, and spirituality in nature could be more inclined to have an ecocentric worldview. This can happen more easily once basic human needs are met, like reduced illness due to air pollution and pedestrian streetscapes. Thus, both shallow and deep ecological initiatives may work together to achieve healthier, more connected communities.

Critics of deep ecology, such as social ecologist Murray Bookchin, claim the Platform of Deep Ecology (LaChapelle, 1988) can be inconsistent and incompatible because it is partially based on the individual's philosophical interpretation. Social ecology theory focuses on environmental degradation caused by the hierarchical organization of power and the authoritarian mentality rooted in our societal structure (Bookchin, 1982, p. 1). It rejects deep ecology's equality of all species, instead calling for human's more ecology-focused stewardship over nature and society. Bookchin even goes so far as to describe deep ecology as "eco-la-la" (Sale, 1988, p. 670) in its focus on the spiritual interconnectedness of nature.

Additionally, deep ecology theory can be seen as misanthropic, depending on how radical its interpretation of species equality. In an article by Sale (1988), Murray Bookchin comments:

They are barely disguised racists, survivalists, macho Daniel Boones and outright social reactionaries who offer a vague, formless often self contradictory and invertebrate [movement]

and a kind of crude eco-brutalism similar to Hitler's. Deep ecologists feed on human disasters, suffering and misery...[and are guilty of thinking which]...legitimates extremely regressive, primitivistic and even highly reactionary notions. (p. 670)

This argument continues to critic the problematic vagueness of deep ecology philosophy; it requires everyone to formulate their own interpretation, so it is difficult to dismiss reactionary opinions that call for violent action. Deep ecologists vary from the peaceful, solitary philosopher Henry David Thoreau, to the *Earth First!* journalist David Foreman, who argues that a nuclear war would be less damaging to the earth because it would end industrial society (Sessions, 1996).

Deep ecology itself is not politically focused; its roots are centered in individual and collective philosophy. Although it is often linked to environmental justice movements and political, grass-roots action, social ecologists and eco-feminists agree that it does not analyze enough of the social forces at work in environmental destruction. Eco-feminists have criticized some deep ecologists for not clarifying the connection between oppression of nature and oppression of women, further exposing the theory's missing link between environmental damage and patriarchal or unequal social structures (Canda et al., 2012).

Therefore, its idealistic and apolitical qualities make it difficult to empirically measure its effectiveness in social work practice. It may address the importance of our diversity, interconnectedness, and our understanding of the person's role in the environment, but its application to social justice work is left up to interpretation. Its "rejection of human-centeredness and a form of rationalism that prioritizes abstract thought and decontextual understanding of the world" (Canda, et al., 2012, p. 45) is a meaningful, comprehensive perspective of human behavior. However, further research needs to be done to address societal and individual barriers to a deeper and more peaceful interaction with nature.

Deep ecology can be more directly applicable to social work practice if it addresses potential disadvantages caused by environmental racism to achieving the transcendental perception it deems necessary. For example, Naess encourages deep ecologists to attend to place-based "ecosophies" (Drengson, 1997). However, many times historical massacres and forced migration by oppressive political legislation have destroyed communities' indigenous knowledge.

The Wyandot, Shawnee, Delaware, and Kansa tribes settled Argentine and Quindaro first, but few tribe members remain to pass down their practices, rich in values of connection with nature. African Americans first settled Quindaro, but many of their outdoor traditions were squelched due to segregation and racist violence in their community, like Outdoor Afro leader Saxon-Ross' grandmother experienced (Meraji, 2015). Political history's role in the destruction of indigenous knowledge needs further analysis if deep ecology is to be truly relevant and capable of promoting both ecological and social well-being.

In conclusion, deep ecology theory can most effectively be applied to social work practice in the Quindaro and Argentine neighborhoods by first addressing residents' basic needs. Our immediate environment is where we experience daily life, and if our surrounding environment is not healthy, the harder it is to connect to it (Grant, 2003, p. 113). By looking closer at society's impact on these two focus communities' natural environments, solutions derived from deep and shallow ecology can affect positive change. Deep ecology theory can enhance constituents' interconnectedness and inspire them to take a less anthropocentric approach towards environmental justice efforts. A spiritual connection with nature can also move residents to participate in EJ action. It is a tool to expand one's perspective, leading to creative solutions that benefit people and their environment as one.

Informing Quindaro and Argentine residents about existing or potential environmental degradation in their neighborhoods is essential to begin eliminating environmental racism. Highlighting historical heroes like Harriet Tubman who had strong relationships with the natural world can also remind minority residents that they belong within it. When residents have access to information about local environmental injustices, they can realize that the personal problems they face may be political. With the help of social workers, organizers and advocacy groups, they can demand more distributional, procedural, and process environmental justice in their community. Deep ecology emphasizes that this justice begins with an individual, spiritual connectedness to our environment. Only then can social action holistically serve all living things.

Author Note

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