

Beyond the human – Garden communities in community gardens

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1 Introduction

This paper contributes to the growing body of literature on ecosocial work that advocates for a refocus of the social work profession towards more-than-human environments and their interconnectedness. The number of publications in the field of environmentally-conscious social work has been growing exponentially and different approaches have been developed to integrate the natural world into social work (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017), including green social work (Dominelli, 2012, 2018; Noble, 2016), environmental social work (Alston, 2013; Gray et al., 2013), and ecosocial work (Boetto, 2019; Bailey et al., 2018; Närhi & Matthies, 2018). Ecosocial work recognises the significance of the natural and built environments on people's wellbeing and asserts the importance of more-than-human relationships as an inherent part of people's lives. Social, political and economic structures are seen as embedded in and inseparable from the ecological environment (Schmitz et al., 2013). Issues of social justice and social cohesion that social work conventionally tackles are approached through an ecosocial and structural approach rather than an anthropocentric and individualistic lens (Matthies & Närhi, 2016). Rambaree, Powers, and Smith (2019, p. 205, emphasis in original) argue that, "ecosocial work is not a specialty within social work, rather all social work can, and [...] *should*, be ecosocial work" since all life is interconnected, with humans forming only one part of a greater ecosystem. With growing awareness of the intersections between social and ecological challenges in social work and the impact of environmental changes intensifying on human life, a better understanding of the interconnectedness between people and their ecological environment is critical for developing future trajectories of (eco)social work.

One context in which the relationships between people and other-than-human beings, such as animals or plants, become particularly concrete and tangible are community gardens. This study was therefore guided by two research questions: Firstly, what are social workers' experiences of ecosocial work practice in community gardens? And secondly, what role do the relations that are forged and fostered between humans and other-than-human beings play in the context of these gardens?

2 Ecosocial work and community gardens

Conventionally the term *community garden* describes gardens as spaces that bring people from various backgrounds together in a quest to connect with one another, grow food and make neighbourhoods greener. Gardens are "dynamic multilayered spaces" (Borčić et al., 2016, p. 58) that grow in the intersections between food politics, urban planning, environmental activism, horticulture, social movements, and social action. As such, gardens provide a physical space to relax, socialise and 'hang out' but also offer an entry point into bigger political debates. Gardens in their various shapes and sizes form communal places where people simply grow food and flowers together but also to tackle challenges of transnational scope, such as food security, loss of biodiversity or urbanisation, at a local level

(Firth et al., 2011; Nettle, 2014). From an ecological perspective, green spaces in urban areas, including community gardens, help to improve the quality of life for human and other-human-beings alike, for instance by conserving urban biodiversity (Aronson et al., 2017; Matteson et al., 2008), mitigating the negative impacts of urban heat islands (Shishegar, 2014), and contributing to air filtration, noise reduction and rainwater drainage (Breuste et al., 2013).

For the scope of this paper, the term *community* garden is defined very loosely. Community gardens can vary in their size, purpose, design, gardening style, and whether or not they grow edible and/or inedible plants. They can be structured to hold one community plot or many individual plots that are tended by smaller groups of people. Such gardens can be located in a variety of places, for instance neighbourhood community centres, hospitals, schools, prisons or faith-based institutions (Guitart et al., 2012; Nettle, 2014), but are generally located close to people's everyday activities. Laage-Thomsen and Blok (2020) emphasise that community gardens greatly vary in their styles of political engagement and cannot necessarily be regarded as a form of justice-oriented grassroots activism. Some gardens might be places of recreation, spaces to socialise and neighbourhood meeting points that are "oriented inwards towards community-based familiarity" (p. 12), while other gardens might be sites for critical public engagement and "place-based resistances" (p. 7).

Community gardens are to be distinguished from private backyard gardens and privately rented allotment gardens. A community garden "is in some sense a public garden in terms of ownership, access, and degree of democratic control" (Ferris, 2001, p.560). While allotment sites tend to cover a larger area than community gardens, they follow a strict division into individually assigned (and paid for) plots. They are less likely to be located directly in neighbourhoods but can instead be found at the periphery of cities or towns (Exner & Schützenberger, 2018), and follow specific national legal regulations (Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens, 2016). In contrast, community gardens follow a less strict administration but "are often an expression of social and political identity" (Cabral et al., 2017, p. 45), governed by gardeners collectively, and open to visitors and gardeners without any financial implications.

Research in and around community gardens has significantly increased over the last few years, with papers being published in a broad variety of disciplines and covering a multitude of research angles (Guitart et al., 2012). Community gardens are, for example, investigated as sites of solidarity and collective social action (Nettle, 2014), as spaces for urban agriculture (Classens, 2014), sites of anti-neoliberal resistance and environmental activism (Ghose & Pettygrove, 2014; McKay, 2013) but also as urban agriculture programmes that perform as a social safety net and thus arguably support the ongoing neoliberalisation of the welfare state (Pudup, 2008; McClintock, 2014). Gardening has further been described as an activity that promotes community building and environmental education (Datta, 2016), cooperation and democracy (Glover et al., 2005) as well as people's health and wellbeing (Hond et al., 2019; Zanko et al., 2014). Kingsley et al. (2019), however, found that, despite this "myriad of studies which posit varying disciplinary approaches" (p. 3), most community garden research is geographically limited to the United States. They further note that more robust approaches are needed to reliably measure the impact of community gardens on public health and environmental policy.

Many of these research areas also link to ecosocial work since they touch issues of social and ecological justice, more-than-human relationships, poverty, active citizenship and health. Community gardens can serve as an entry point for ecosocial work into communities and

research areas. Thus, existing social work research in and about community gardens is similarly diverse, however not as plentiful as in other disciplines. In the “Workbook for social work practitioners and educators” about promoting community and environmental sustainability in social work, Meredith Tetloff and Jill Wicknick (2019) write about community gardens as “pedagogical tools” (p. 61) that can be used to educate social work students about the connections between food security, health and poverty. They aim to “connect caring for plants in a garden to caring for persons living in poverty through service in a community garden” and try to show how social work in community gardens can tie into the effort of improving the wellbeing of people and combat food insecurity. Similarly, Heerink and colleagues (2021) highlight the benefits of practice placements in community gardens for social work students. The food aspect was also taken up by Jennifer Jettner (2017) who, in a doctoral dissertation on racial diversity and urban food deserts, provides guidance for environmental social work on culturally appropriate engagement practices for greater food security. Shephard (2013, 2016) research focusses on community gardens in New York City as sites of community organising and social action, and as spaces for social work students to learn about social organising, sustainability and community development. Bailey, Hendrick and Palmer (2018) investigate ecosocial work action in Australian gardens and find community gardens to be spaces to practice egalitarianism and sites of “resistance to hyper-capitalism, consumerism, and the commodification of food” (p. 103). They further assert how placements in community gardens can “provide powerful learning opportunities for students” (p. 104). In regards to ecosocial work, the authors identify several ways in which community gardens can improve practice, for instance by loosening social hierarchies, providing a space to learn, share and listen as well as developing a better understanding of ecological justice and (un)sustainability.

In this context, this study aimed to further explore community gardens as sites of ecosocial work practice and places for multispecies communities in the UK context. Specifically, I aimed to address social workers’ experiences and challenges of practical ecosocial work in garden settings to further develop ecocentric social work practices. In contrast to previous research, this study was not primarily focussed on human communities and benefits in community gardens but addressed the variety of more-than-human relationships that are formed and sustained in garden spaces.

3 Methodology

To better understand how valuable ecosocial work practice could look like, I followed Bruce Morito’s (2002) distinction between *thinking about ecology* and *thinking ecologically*. For Morito, the difference lies in the mode of thought that is applied regarding ecological issues. He argues that in the modern Western mode of *thinking about ecology* an anthropocentric perspective dominates the perception of ecological problems as well as the practices of analysing and solving these challenges. He describes this perspective as “a world view that promotes both intellectual and emotional detachment from the local effects that environmental degradation has on the land and on people” (p. 8). According to him, these modern ways of *thinking about ecology* are not only “inadequate” (p. 5) to respond to ecosocial questions, but are in fact the root cause of many ecological challenges we face today. Further he argues that revising and adapting existing modes of thought is not enough since ecology cannot be “appropriated into already well-established modes of thinking” (p. 5) that fundamentally disregard the value of other-than-human beings and the physical environment. Morito therefore argues that more fundamental changes are necessary in the way people understand and position themselves in relation to their other-than-human

environment. Ecological challenges should not be understood as technical problems that can be fixed with the right invention or enough financial investment. Instead, environmental challenges need to be seen as “world view issues” (p. 8) that require a change in our mode of thought towards *thinking ecologically*.

According to Morito, “‘thinking ecologically’ is to be attuned to the multiple facets of our environmental relationships” (p. 5). The engagement with other-than-human beings needs to go beyond noticing them only when they are or have a problem, when they disturb us or become dangerous, like species on the verge of extinction, animals transmitting the coronavirus or dandelions messing up our lawns. Humans cannot regard the non-human world from an outsider’s perspective but have to find their place in the midst of all beings on this planet. Morito proposes an ecocentric approach in which we as human beings “begin to understand ourselves, perceive, judge, analyse, formulate concepts and assume responsibilities differently” (p. 9). The value of other-than-human beings and the physical environment as well as “conditions of significance and legitimacy” (p. 9) are determined based on a form of environmental ethics that centres around eco-systemic relations instead of human needs and wants. When *thinking ecologically*, ecology is not understood as its own academic discipline; rather ecological concerns are incorporated into every other field of inquiry. Therefore, Morito’s approach fits an ecosocial work approach in its emphasis on the value of other-than-human beings and the significance of overcoming the ontological separation between humans and the ecosystem that they are embedded in. Just like ecosocial work, *thinking ecologically* recognises the overarching relevance and interconnectedness of ecological issues with other areas concerning human life. Morito’s work thus clearly speaks to existing ecosocial work frameworks that challenge modernist assumptions in social work (Boetto, 2017). However, by bringing theoretical work from outside the social work realm into the conversation, I aim to broaden ecosocial works theoretical standing and promote transdisciplinary thinking about ecosocial challenges. In this study, I therefore used Morito’s distinction between *thinking ecologically* and *thinking about ecology* to analyse social workers’ experiences of ecosocial work practice in community gardens. I utilised his concepts to outline how gardening is not necessarily ecocentric and not all activities in community gardens can be seen as ecosocial work.

My qualitative analysis was based on five interviews that I conducted with social workers from London and Southend-on-Sea, England in July 2020. All participants were qualified social workers, however, not all of them worked in social work positions. At the time of the interviews, two participants were university lecturers in social work departments, two worked as social workers for local councils, and one participant worked as manager for a local educational charity. All participants had personal and professional experience in working with community gardens and/or therapeutic gardening. Interviewees were identified through an online search about gardening projects in England and subsequent snowball sampling. Ethical approval was granted by the ethics committee at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London). The interviews followed a semi-structured outline tailored to the individual participant according to their professional experience. Questions focussed on interviewees’ practical experiences with ecosocial work in community gardens, their perspective on thinking social work ecologically, and the importance of more-than-human relationships for ecosocial work in community gardens.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, England was still in lockdown by the time the interviews were planned and conducted. Severe restrictions on social life and mobility meant that the number of participants had to be reduced to five since many community gardens were closed

and social workers too busy with COVID-related problem solving. Further, all interviews were conducted online using Zoom since travelling and meeting in person was not permitted or too difficult to arrange safely. Zoom was used because all participants were familiar with using this software and it allowed for easy audio-visual recording. The utilisation of video conferencing as a method of qualitative data collection can be a convenient alternative to in-person interviews, for example, if participants are geographically far dispersed, the researcher and participant are unable to travel or, as in the case of this study, travelling and meeting in person is not safe (Gray et al., 2020; Lo Iacono et al., 2016).

The interviews were analysed using thematic coding and thematic analysis (Gibbs, 2018; Given, 2008). First, all interviews were coded line-by-line, i.e. paragraphs, sentences, and even sub-clauses, were labelled and categorised. Codes were identified using Kathy Charmaz' guiding questions to better understand interviewees' statements and environments (Charmaz 2003 quoted in Grbich 2013). In total, 21 codes were identified. Subsequently, coded passages were summarised and recontextualised into three themes. Two of these themes (experiences with ecosocial work; more-than-human relationships) were anticipated in the data set since they were explicitly included in the data collection to speak to the research question. One other theme (human benefits) emerged during the coding process and was unexpected in the context of this study.

4 Findings and discussion

In this section, I aim to analyse and discuss the findings from this study, using Morito's concept of *thinking ecologically* described above. This chapter is divided into three parts according to the three main themes that emerged during the interviews, namely social workers' experiences of ecosocial work practice, participants' human-centred perspective on gardening, and more-than-human relationships in garden communities.

4.1 Experience with ecosocial work in practice

When asked about professional experience with ecosocial work in practice, the vast majority of responses centred around participants' frustration with their profession regarding ecological issues. Even though all interviewees had a strong interest in ecosocial work and regarded ecological concerns as very relevant, they were alarmed about social work's ability to deliver on ecological justice and including ecological issues into their everyday practice. Three participants were troubled about the narrow definition of social work in the UK (reference was made to the Children and Social Work Act 2017) that they felt hinders the profession to truly reflect the diversity and complexity of both social and ecological life. One interviewee from Southend-on-Sea stated that "the default in the council and in the public services is still delivery services. It's still about passive consumers". He described his work as "task-focussed" and "very much process-driven". Another participant further criticised social work's managerialist approach that minimised his work to "a set of forms and procedures". Consequently, working with community gardens was seen as challenging since practitioners "can't give it a case number" and outcomes were more complex to assess. Social workers felt that in this "production line" of social services there was no space, time and energy to consider ecological concerns in practice. Rather social work stayed very "human-focused", disregarding all other-than-human life and the physical/built environment that people are embedded in. One social worker emphasized how, in his opinion, the profession still perceives humans "as the top of the pyramid", superior to and disconnected from other forms of life, that makes it difficult to justify the importance of ecological concerns for social services. These concerns are echoed in ecosocial work literature (Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2019)

that highlights the need for social work to overcome its anthropocentric focus and shift not only its practices but its ontological base to a more inclusive and truly holistic paradigm. Similarly, participants' experience indicates that apart from interested individuals, ecological concerns have not yet reached social work practice at a systemic level. Their accounts imply that, in practice, ecological concerns are not considered relevant (enough) for social work in England. Rather, social workers seem to not even think about ecology in their everyday practice, let alone thinking their mandate ecologically. For ecosocial work research this is a sobering but not entirely new realisation as similar concerns have been raised, for instance, by Molyneux (2010).

While all participants agreed on the significance of ecosocial work theory, research and practice, they were unsure about "which tact to take in terms of expanding social work to include those ecological issues". Albeit for some participants small changes in an individual's behaviour constituted important first steps (e.g. reduce litter and use of plastics), some also underlined the need of collective and political action and stressed how social work needs to understand that ecological issues "are at the core of what we're doing" and should not be "co-opted into these kinds of cosmetic things" that do not address the underlying causes. They emphasized that professionals needed to understand that ecological issues are not simply a new field of work but central to social work's mandate and ethical standards. Participants' different stances on what ecosocial work means in practice illustrate how Morito's distinction of *thinking ecologically* and *thinking about ecology* resonates with ecosocial work debates. What one participant called "buzzword" initiatives, mentioning examples like going paper-free and installing energy-saving LCD-screens, are activities that acknowledge the need for ecological action, however, they do not go beyond the already existing anthropocentric paradigm or drastically refocus social work practice in councils and other institutions. Simple, efficient and seemingly effective measures are put in place to make social work practice appear more environmentally-conscious but are mostly "cosmetic" compared to the paradigm shift that is necessary to think social work ecologically (Bell, 2012). Other participants described a much more fundamental change to how social work is defined and how professionals interpret their mandate regarding ecological issues. This is much closer to Morito's mode of *thinking ecologically* and in line with Rambaree et al. (2019) who position ecology as a cross-sectional issue. Ecology should thus not be an addition but a guiding principle for social work theory and practice.

Regarding community gardens, all participants described their experiences of working with service users in garden spaces as very rewarding, inclusive and relevant. Community gardens were seen as great spaces to link social and ecological issues, dismantle hierarchies between professionals and service users and establish deeper connections between social workers and the community they serve. One interviewee talked about his experience of using community gardens as a location to meet and talk to service users "in an environment that wasn't kind of sitting down in an office that was really uncomfortable". The benefits of community gardens as spaces for ecosocial work have also been described by Bailey et al. (2018) who found that gardens provide social workers with a space "to apply their values, skills, and knowledge to support sustainability through eco-justice and community building, specifically by supporting resistance, facilitating cooperation and trust, and favouring egalitarian relationships" (p. 107).

4.2 Human-centred perspectives on community gardens

Despite the focus of this study on an ecocentric approach to social work, participants had much to say about the many benefits that community gardens offer for human gardeners. The

importance of growing fresh food locally was an aspect stressed by all five interviewees. Gardens were regarded as vital to counteract food insecurity, particularly in deprived urban areas where accessing affordable fresh food could be challenging (see also Diekmann et al., 2020; Kusumanagari & Ellisa, 2021; Tetloff & Wicknick, 2019). Closely linked to growing food was the aspect of education. Participants explained how gardens functioned as spaces for learning and sharing knowledge, both through formal outdoor education programmes and informal conversations between gardeners. One participant described how the organisation that she works for offers workshops for children to learn about food production and plant medicine. She explained how children were taught “new life skills, so they’re learning how to plant things and how to tend things. They’re also learning where their food comes from in a very practical way”, for example by cooking soup out of freshly harvested vegetables to establish direct links between growing, harvesting and eating (see also Robinson & Zajicek, 2005; Morgan et al., 2009). These two aspects – growing food and education – exemplify how community gardens can be valuable places to introduce people to ecological issue, involve them in outdoor activities, and encourage them to think about ecological and social challenges on a local level. Albeit social work can and should support these community efforts, not all activities taking place in a garden can be understood as ecosocial work. The accounts given by social workers illustrate how gardening is often very much centred solely around human benefits, instrumentalising gardening activities to solve social problems. Other-than-human beings like plants are not valued in their own agency but used as tools to fight poverty or increase social inclusion. Ecological concerns are side-lined and ecology thought through the anthropocentric lens that Morito warns us about. From this angle, gardening uses ecological means to reach social goals and, regarding its potential for ecosocial work, does not differ from other social activities.

A third aspect that was intensely discussed by participants as a human-centred benefit is the positive impact of gardens on people’s mental wellbeing. Several participants made the experience that spending time in community gardens was like a “therapy” to gardeners and visitors alike. One participant observed how young people participating in a gardening programme “both throughout the session and over the sessions relax” and enjoyed the physical outdoor space. She noted that in her experience contributing to a communal garden project can increase young people’s self-esteem and help them develop their social skills. Another participant described how people with mental health problems, through visiting a garden regularly, slowly started “engaging with each other through the common cause that they were doing.” He concluded that gardening was “a calming situation” that could change people’s “behaviour [...] their attitude, thinking and understanding”. Participants’ observations about the benefits of gardening for mental health resonate with findings from community garden research in this area that indicate, for example, how gardening can reduce stress and anxiety (Soga et al., 2017; van den Berg & Custers, 2011). For participants in this study, the mental health benefits for gardeners seemed to stem mainly from two aspects: gardens as accessible and inclusive outdoor spaces, and the relationships between human and other-than-human beings. First, several participants stressed the role of community gardens in providing accessible and safe outdoor spaces to simply breathe and move freely, particularly in urban areas. One participant stressed how for learners from deprived areas gardening is about “having space, physical space. Because their school is very small and their classroom is very small, and they’re all very much on top of each other.” Two interviewees further emphasized the distinct character of community gardens as “community-owned spaces” and highlighted the importance to “reclaim outdoor spaces for society” and collectively fight the “narrowing, or the hollowing out of public spaces”.

Similar to above, regarding community gardens simply as urban green spaces to improve human wellbeing cannot be seen as thinking about gardens ecologically. While access to outdoor space is important, gardens are again instrumentalised to counteract social isolation and lack of space experienced by human inhabitants of urban areas. In this perspective, gardens are no different from other green spaces, such as public parks. The element of gardens as form of communal resistance towards neoliberal policies is in line with many authors in community garden literature and certainly with the image many gardeners have of their own gardens (McClintock, 2014; McKay, 2013). However, this enthusiastic representation is also heavily criticised. Pudup (2008) refers to community gardens as “spaces of neoliberal governmentality” (p. 1228) in which individuals are left on their own to adapt to economic and social changes. Regarding food production, community gardens often “fill in gaps left by the rolling back of the social safety net” and market failure (McClintock, 2014, p. 148). From a health perspective, gardens can not only promote wellbeing but can also pose potential risks to human and other-than-human beings alike, for example, through high levels of soil pollution with heavy metals and the use of chemical gardening methods like pesticides and fertilizers (Cooper et al., 2020; Daniels et al., 2020; Ziss et al., 2021). Further, community gardens can easily become the setting of ecological, social, political, and economic conflicts, and evoke questions of access since activities are often directed at specific social groups (Cutts et al., 2017; Exner & Schützenberger, 2018; Mmako et al., 2019; Quastel, 2009). Barron (2017) therefore argues that a more nuanced discourse about community gardens is necessary “to get beyond assertions that community gardens are either inherently resistant to, or reproductive of, neoliberalism” (p. 1142). For ecosocial work practice in community gardens these are important points. Engaging in community gardens is not necessarily transformative and ecological, and does not automatically constitute valuable ecosocial work. Thinking ecologically involves a deeper analysis of a specific gardening space and context to ensure that practices are socially and ecologically sustainable. Thinking ecologically also means that gardens cannot only serve human interest but need to be understood as multispecies communities in which our “assumptions that shape ways of understanding, knowing and valuing” (Morito, 2002, p. 6) need to be newly assessed.

The second aspect, that participants mentioned in relation to the human wellbeing benefits of gardens, concerns the relationships between human and other-than-human beings created and sustained in community gardens. Several participants mentioned the importance of more-than-human relationships and their contribution towards the therapeutic effect that community gardens seemed to have on gardeners. These more-than-human connections will be further discussed in the next section.

4.3 More-than-human relationships

The relationships that existed between gardeners and other-than-human actors in community gardens formed the third theme of this study. Here I argue that to fully understand the benefits of community gardens as sites for ecosocial work, it is vital to not only focus on the diverse social aspects of gardening but also investigate the relationships that gardeners forge with more-than-human actors living and dwelling in these garden spaces. As mentioned in the previous section, participants attributed the positive effects of gardening on people’s wellbeing at least partially to their relationships with their other-than-human environment. When directly asked about more-than-human relationships, social workers underlined how for gardeners the connections with plants were just as important as the relationships with fellow gardeners. According to them, people came to community gardens not only to discuss gardening techniques and spend time with other people outside but to visit specific trees or

care for a particular plant. One participant described very vividly how these more-than-human connections were created “almost organically” as gardeners were “nurturing and growing things”. Another social worker explained how people got attached to trees they planted and cared for, treating them as friends. He affirmed that for the most part, the improvement in people’s mental health was “because of those trees there” as they gave gardeners a sense of stability and belonging in a specific place. He stressed that “working with the plants, the trees” was the main reason for people to come to the garden. Gardeners got attached to the plants they nurtured and cared for. They formed relationships with human and other-than-human beings alike, and re-evaluated assumptions about who is included in a garden community. Community gardens formed a location where caring and belonging were not defined by human/other-than-human but shifted to include more than one species. The creatures that dwelled with gardeners in these green spaces were not just resources and crops to be used for human benefits (Francis & Ginn, 2014). Instead, gardeners forged alliances with other-than-human beings to contest the shape of the environment that surrounds them, to propose local solutions and to advance alternative lifestyles (Certomà, 2011). This suggests that the social benefits discussed above are at least to a certain degree rooted in the connection with other-than-human beings rather than emerging from human-only communities alone. From social workers’ accounts, other-than-human beings like trees seemed to be treated as equals and nurtured with the same diligence as human friends.

These findings are crucial for ecosocial work since – in contrast to the human-benefit centred perspective described above – this mode of caring for each other creates what Donna Haraway (2016, p.132) calls “ongoingness”. Ongoingness expresses a webbed movement across species, a way of flourishing together, and co-creating the world we inhabit through multispecies relationality. Haraway describes this as “nurturing, or inventing, or discovering, or somehow cobbling together ways for living and dying well with each other” (p.132). As such, ongoingness describes the possibility of creating life and places together with others – human and other-than-human beings – beyond a mode of mere survival and through collaboration, invention and imagination. Together with Morito’s *thinking ecologically*, ongoingness can help us to better understand community gardens not only as green spaces that are created by human gardeners, but also as places that are claimed by fungi, inhabited by countless animals, transformed by plants, flooded by rain, and nourished by the soil. These ways of interacting in a particular place make evident the constant co-constitution and co-creation of a space in which communities inevitably need to be defined as more-than-human. Based on this, there is a case for putting the deconstruction of the binary division between nature and society, the decentralisation of the human perspective and the nurturing of multispecies communities at the forefront of ecosocial work. In community gardens, ecosocial work has the chance to not only use nature as a tool for human benefits but to create a practice that “is attuned to the multiple facets of our environmental relationships” (Morito, 2002, p. 5).

Participants also indicated that relationships between gardeners and other-than-human beings are not always positive. One social worker described how even in the “progressive” and “organic” community garden he attended people destroyed a wasp nest because the insects were regarded as an annoyance to gardeners and visitors. Two other interviewees reported how uprooting unwanted plants in vegetable patches and flower beds was an essential but mostly unpopular task to ensure the flourishing and healthy growth of species desired by gardeners while diminishing the chance of “weeds” to steal nutrients and light. Plants like cleavers (*galium aparine*), fireweed (*chamaenerion angustifolium*), stinging nettle (*urtica dioica*), ground elder (*aegopodium podagraria*) or horsetail (*equisetum arvense*) were

regarded as "wild plants in the wrong place" (The Royal Horticultural Society, 2022) and as such, they were seen as a nuisance rather than a nectar source for pollinators, food for caterpillars, or plants with vast medical and culinary uses. The killing of undesired species, commonly labelled as weeds or pests, reveals how gardens are always exclusive spaces. Just as they are not accessible for every person due to social or political barriers, certain plants and animals are excluded through eradication and death, either through herbicides and pesticides or uprooting and displacement. Haraway (2008) reminds us that killing is a central concern whenever species meet and does not necessarily denounce ethical and benevolent relationships between human and other-than-human beings. Ongoingness does not negate the death of individuals but includes "killing and nurturing, living and dying — and remembering who lives and who dies and how" (Haraway, 2016, p. 28). However, what Haraway calls "the killing of ongoingness – double death" (p. 163), i.e. killing for the sake of eradication, a pointless "surplus death of both individuals and of kinds" (p. 134) is what destroys the healthy multispecies relationships found in community gardens. Both life and death happen in gardening relationships but the killing of ongoingness, of the togetherness between beings (both physically and metaphorically), is what tips the balance between human and other-than-human beings in garden spaces as well as more broadly in the current anthropocentric era (Haraway, 2016).

With regards to social work, participants repeatedly complained about how their profession seems to be unable "to understand the connection that people have to things that are not human" even though more-than-human relationships form a critical part of people's everyday life, in community gardens and elsewhere. As an area within social work that promotes an ecocentric perspective on theory and practice, ecosocial work cannot fall into the same trap but needs to actively promote, nurture and sustain multispecies communities. This requires practitioners to value what Hustak and Myers (2012, p. 76) call "interspecies intimacy", and the deep and caring relationships that people establish with other-than-human beings, for example with trees in garden settings. Without this reevaluation of how social work acts toward and values people's more-than-human relationships (Morito, 2002), practitioners fall short of thinking ecologically about ecosocial work in community gardens. This shift necessitates moving beyond gardening styles and activities that centre around human benefits and social challenges. The question is thus not what gardens can do for people but how gardens are utilised by various species to support each other and how we as human beings can participate in these interdependent multispecies relationships. Gardens have the potential to render visible the multiple facets and complexity of interconnectedness between human and other-than-human beings. Ecosocial work can use this potential to foster ongoingness in multi-species communities and create a sense of belonging to a place and with each other.

5 Conclusions

This study focused on social workers experiences of working in community gardens as spaces for ecosocial work in England. Participants' explanations showed how including an ecosocial perspective into social work practice is still challenging for practitioners. Social work continues to hold on to its managerialist and anthropocentric mode of work that hinders the profession to consider the complexity of people's communities and systematically excludes their other-than-human environment. Further, findings of this study illustrate that if social workers think about ecological issues, they tend to opt for conventional and seemingly efficient activities, using other-than-human beings in gardens as a tool to increase human wellbeing. This profoundly contrasts with ecosocial work's ecocentric perspective that aims to promote ongoingness and the wellbeing of all living beings. Findings from this study

clearly indicate that advocating for and acting on an ecosocial work approach is challenging and radical for practitioners, since it goes against everything they experience and are told to care about in the “production line” of social services in the UK. As suggested in previous research, community gardens can be a valuable space for ecosocial work practice. However, not all social work activities conducted in gardens can be understood as ecological since gardens are often instrumentalised and solely valued according to their impact on human life.

More research is needed to further characterise the various facets of multispecies relationships in community gardens (and elsewhere) that have been highlighted in this paper. To avoid being stuck in old paradigms, future research should be transdisciplinary by nature, including different social work perspectives – e.g. statutory social workers, social work academics as well as practitioners who *do* social work but cannot call themselves social workers – but also experts from other disciplines such as human geography, political ecology, horticulture, or urban studies. Future research can be situated in gardens to explore their potential for ecosocial work even further but could also include other spaces where species meet and engage with each another.

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