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Interview with researcher Rhonda Hallberg, on behalf of the Canadian Association of Social Workers

By **Emmanuelle Larocque**, Ph.D., Professeure, Département de travail social, Université du Québec en Outaouais

The Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) recently launched a newly revised code of ethics, values, and guidelines. The Code of Ethics serves as a foundation for the ethical practice of social work in Canada and is consistent with the International Federation of Social Worker's (IFSW) International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work (2014) (CASW, 2023). Of interest for this special issue on ecosocial work, two notable aspects distinguish this Code from previous versions. The first refers to the development of the code through the lens of the Truth and Reconciliation principles, which led to the inclusion of a new value (Value 3) to underscore the profession's commitment to pursue Truth and Reconciliation. The second involves the development of a guiding principle which highlights social workers' responsibilities towards the protection of the environment (Guiding Principle 2.4). To explain these important additions, we talk to Rhonda Hallberg, the principal researcher who supported the development of the 2024 Code of Ethics. Rhonda Hallberg was the lead for the project and brought extensive experience as a social worker working in child welfare, continuous quality assurance activities and undergraduate social work education as a sessional instructor at the School of Social Work Kings University College, University of Western Ontario.

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Emmanuelle Larocque: As stated on the Canadian Association of Social Workers' website, the changes announced on January 8 2024 represents the first major overhaul to this document for Canadian social workers in over 20 years. Why undertake such a significant transformation to the Code of Ethics?

Rhonda Hallberg: The Code of Ethics and Guidelines of Practice (2024) were developed to address current realities of social work practice across Canada and emerging ethical issues such as the profession addressing the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the increased number of social workers providing virtual counselling and online social work services, confidentiality and privacy issues pertaining to electronic records and databases, and a range of social justice issues. The previous code from 2005 did not address modern practice issues.

Emmanuelle Larocque: Can you talk about the process behind the development of Value 3 (Pursuing Truth and Reconciliation?)

Rhonda Hallberg: The Calls to Action set out by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission calls for significant changes to several sectors where social workers are employed, such as child welfare, education, health, justice and newcomer support. From its earliest beginnings, the profession has been dedicated to social justice and CASW recognized the Code as an opportunity to move the profession further along on the journey to reconciliation. CASW established a Federation Code oversight committee that endorsed the requirement that revisions are to be through a Truth and Reconciliation lens.

The project began with an analysis of the Truth and Reconciliation principles and Calls to Action to determine how they applied to ethical social work practice. The key elements were:

- Truth about the profession's history with First Nation, Inuit, Metis and Indigenous peoples,
- Truth about the history of colonization and discrimination against First Nation, Inuit and Metis peoples,
- The profession's obligation to uphold the treaty and constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples,
- The profession's obligation to consult with Indigenous peoples such as Elders and Knowledge Keepers about the traditions and culture of the Indigenous communities being served by social workers to ensure that services respect culture and tradition,
- To provide social work services that are culturally appropriate, and to approach services with humility and sensitivity, and individual social worker's ethical obligations to reflect on their own biases, values, preferences and culture.

In the development of the Code, Indigenous and other members of CASW were consulted at three different times for their feedback and opinion about change to the Code.

In 2021, the project consulted with Subject Matter Experts (i.e., schools of social work and academic ethics experts, provincial regulatory bodies, and provincial territorial associations). Several Indigenous social workers from schools of social work participated in these consultations and strongly endorsed ethical responsibilities to Truth and Reconciliation in the Code.

In 2022, the project consulted with members of CASW through surveys (English and French) and focus groups. Thirty focus groups were offered, including eight directed to Indigenous members. Those eight focus groups were facilitated by Indigenous social workers who applied a two-eyed seeing approach; the focus group sessions focused on draft 1 of the Code. The discussions in those sessions provided rich information and guidance for the fine-tuning of Value 3, as well as for some Guiding Principles in other Values that address the rights of Indigenous peoples and ethical responsibilities of social workers when practising with Indigenous service users.

Value 3 has two Guiding Principles that are closely aligned with Truth and Reconciliation Principles. The first Guiding Principle focuses on ethical responsibilities to respect and uphold the treaty and constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples, to understand the profession's historical role in colonialism, and to advocate for system-wide changes. The second Guiding Principle focuses on enhancing and strengthening social work practice with Indigenous communities, including respecting the role of Elders and Knowledge Keepers and integrating Indigenous world views into practice.

Emmanuelle Larocque: The Code includes a new guiding principle which highlights the profession's role in protecting and preserving the environment. Can you explain why the CASW finds it important that social workers consider the environment in their ethical posture?

Rhonda Hallberg: The ethical duty for social workers to advocate for a clean and healthy environment has been a professional responsibility for several years and was included in the 2005 CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice under the Ethical Responsibilities to Society section (8.5.1). In 2020, CASW released a position statement on Climate Change and Social Work that provided the Canadian perspective and promoted education, advocacy and 'be-the-change-you-wish-to-see-in-the-world' approach. For social workers, climate change is a social justice issue. In 2021, the Code project consulted with Subject Matter Experts and heard strong recommendations on the

profession's important and urgent responsibilities to raise awareness, advocate for environmental protection and to advocate for services and supports for those who are most significantly impacted by climate change.

Emmanuelle Larocque: What do these changes to the Code of Ethics mean for social work practice and education? In other words, what types of interventions, practices or pedagogies align with the endeavour to “advocate for the stewardship of natural resources and the protection of the environment”?

Rhonda Hallberg: Guiding Principle 2.4 focuses on the ethical responsibilities in four areas: 1. Promote the protection of the environment, 2. Education, 3. Raising awareness of the disproportionate impact that climate change has on vulnerable people, and 4. The rights of Indigenous peoples to be stewards of their lands. Social workers are expected to learn about and acknowledge the detrimental impact of climate change on all people. Social workers are to understand the factors that exacerbate social inequalities between individuals and communities. During the years of the Code development process, many examples arose across Canada of the harmful impact of climate change. Now every part of Canada is impacted by climate change, as seen by the frequent forest fires that cause loss of property and life, floods and droughts that ruin crops, dangerous winter storms, and excessive summer heat that threaten the lives and well-being of people across Canada.

Emmanuelle Larocque: How can social workers uphold this value in their everyday life?

Rhonda Hallberg: There are many ways that social workers can champion this Guiding Principle in their daily practice. Social workers may provide emergency response and critical incident supports to people who have experienced a catastrophic event tied to climate change, such as forest fire, flood, tornado, or winter storm. Social workers can help shape policy to strengthen protection of the environment and to promote education. Social workers develop educational programs to raise awareness about the disproportionate impact climate change has on marginalized families and communities. Social workers advocate for marginalized individuals, families, groups and communities to receive the services and help that they need to recover from a climate crisis or to adapt to climate change. Social workers help problem solve and search for services to help families and communities uphold the rights to clean water, air, land, thriving green spaces, healthcare to cure or alleviate suffering from the impact of climate change, and positive well-being for everyone. Finally, social workers can contribute to protecting the environment in their daily lives through ordinary activities such as conserving natural resources, respecting nature, recycling, reusing, and repurposing items, reducing consumerism, and through other multiple ways to reduce their carbon footprint.

Emmanuelle Larocque: What are the main obstacles that currently hinder the possibilities of embodying this value?

Rhonda Hallberg: The main obstacles to embodying the ethical responsibilities in Guiding Principle 2.4 are both political and personal. At times, governments at all levels have allowed economic constraints to overshadow environmental concerns and commitments. Individuals advocating for environmental protection can become discouraged by the many political barriers to effecting real change and by how slow progress can be. Individuals can experience grief, fear and loss when faced with the existential questions about the future of life on earth.

Guiding Principle 2.4 in the Code focuses on the future and the role of social work. Social workers are expected to acknowledge the reality of climate change, to raise awareness, engage in community

development to strengthen social determinants of health, educate, advocate and give voice to the human experience of those impacted by climate change. Social workers are ethically bound to address human rights and understand the interconnections with the rights to clean and safe water, land, air and the protection of animals and plants.

Emmanuelle Larocque: What links can be made between this new ecologically oriented principle (2.4) and Value 3 (Truth and Reconciliation)?

Rhonda Hallberg: The ethical responsibilities outlined in Guiding Principle 2.4 include advocating for and promoting the right of Indigenous peoples to protect their lands from large-scale unsustainable resource extraction and to be stewards of their land. Social workers are also to advocate for Indigenous world view and knowledge to be integrated into environmental protection laws, policy and initiatives. Those responsibilities are very similar to the ethical responsibilities to pursue Truth and Reconciliation and are aligned with upholding the rights of Indigenous peoples, respecting Indigenous world view, culture, traditions, and language within social work services.

Emmanuelle Larocque: Thank you, Rhonda, for this enlightening discussion. We thank Fred Phelps, Executive Director of the CASW, for coordinating this interview.

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