Original article

Perceptions and attitudes towards the environment among Social Work students at the University of Alicante, Spain

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Abstract

Social Work is a discipline committed to the well-being of people and the planet. It is a profession that, over the years, has internalized environmental problems as part of its theoretical and practical dialectic. The global crises have brought about a paradigm shift that influences the approach to current social problems. Universities and social work training promote the incorporation of an environmental, critical, and sustainable approach to social and environmental problems. This empirical study of quantitative design and descriptive and explanatory purpose aims to understand the perceptions and attitudes towards the environment by students of the Degree in Social Work of the University of Alicante (Spain) and their perceptions and attitudes about the relationship between environment and social work. The study was carried out through an ad hoc questionnaire composed of 11 questions and 23 measurement variables. Data was analyzed through SPSS. A total of 102 students aged between 20 and 49 participated. The results show students' recognition of and concern for environmental problems, taking into account personal, cultural, and political factors that influence these perceptions, as well as the associations between their attitudes and perceptions and the perception of their own behavior towards the environment. It concludes with the need to strengthen ecosocial thinking in students of Social Work and incorporate their knowledge into professional practice.

Keywords: Social work; Pro-environmental behavior; Socio-environmental responsibility; Sustainable development; Environmental education.

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Percepciones y actitudes hacia el medioambiente en estudiantes de Trabajo Social en la Universidad de Alicante, España

Resumen

El Trabajo Social es una disciplina comprometida con el bienestar de las personas y el planeta. Es una profesión que a lo largo de los años ha interiorizado la problemática medioambiental como parte de su dialéctica teórico-práctica. Las crisis mundiales han propiciado un cambio de paradigma que influye en el abordaje de los problemas sociales actuales. Desde las universidades y la formación en Trabajo Social se fomenta la incorporación de un enfoque ambiental, crítico y sostenible de los problemas sociales y ambientales. Este estudio empírico de diseño cuantitativo y finalidad descriptiva y explicativa tiene como objetivo conocer las percepciones y actitudes hacia el medioambiente por parte de estudiantes del Grado en Trabajo Social de la Universidad de Alicante (España), así como sus percepciones y actitudes sobre la relación entre el medioambiente y el Trabajo Social. El estudio se realizó a través de un cuestionario, ad hoc compuesto por 11 preguntas y 23 variables de medición. Los datos se analizaron a través de SPSS. Participaron 102 estudiantes con edades comprendidas entre los 20 y 49 años. Los resultados evidencian el reconocimiento por parte de los estudiantes de la problemática ambiental y su preocupación por ella, teniendo en cuenta los factores personales, culturales y políticos que influyen en estas percepciones, así como las asociaciones entre sus actitudes y percepciones, y la percepción de sus propios comportamientos hacia el medioambiente. Se concluye con la necesidad de fortalecer el pensamiento ecosocial en estudiantes de Trabajo Social e incorporar su conocimiento en la práctica profesional.

Palabras clave: Trabajo Social; Conducta proambiental; Responsabilidad socioambiental; Desarrollo sostenible; Educación ambiental.

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1. Introduction

The ecosocial approach in Social Work: conceptualization, development and current status

Historically, Social Work has focused on addressing the needs of vulnerable populations (Millán-Franco, 2020; Miller *et al.*, 2012). Since its inception, the environment has occupied a central place in its practice (Parra & Prat, 2024), although it was not until the second half of the 20th century that it gained real momentum (Kemp, 2011; Krings *et al.*, 2018); a period marked by the effects of World War II and developmentalism, as well as profound social, historical and cultural changes that affected the lives of people and societies (Parra & Prat, 2024; Treacy, 2020; Valdivia & Medina, 2024). The 1970s marked a turning point in Social Work, shifting towards a model of critical dialogue on human life, the environment, and social justice (Coates *et al.*, 2006; Kim, 2022; Molyneux, 2010).

Since then, Social Work has evolved to prevent and reduce environmental impacts, adapting to the new scenarios of the global ecosocial crisis (Bowles *et al.*, 2018; Krings *et al.*, 2018). The consequences of this spawned new social and environmental movements influencing the development of the ecosocial approach in Social Work, marking a paradigmatic change in the discipline (Batle & Martínez, 2022; Belchior-Rocha, 2017; Liévano, 2013; Miller *et al.*, 2012; Krings *et al.*, 2018; Walter, 2009). With this change, we shifted from a conventional, anthropocentric and individualistic perspective, which conceived of the person as the center of the world, to a more holistic, green, or post-conventional one (Belchior-Rocha, 2017; Parra & Prat, 2024) uniting the ontological, epistemological and methodological dimensions of being, thinking and doing (Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2017; *Bowles et al.*, 2018). However, this theoretical development did not form part of the regular practice of Social Work (Gray & Coates, 2016; Krings *et al.*, 2018), partly due to the absence of pragmatic proposals applicable to its professional reality (Molyneux, 2010).

The ecosocial context integrates both the physical and the ecological environments, considering approaches to them by the Social Sciences and Natural Sciences (Dominelli, 2012; Gómez-Francisco, 2015; Gray *et al.*, 2013; Kim-Zapf, 2022). To this end, Kim-Zapf (2022) introduced the importance of the physical environment in Social Work as a fundamental element in practice, pointing out its presence going back to the origins of this discipline. In this regard, Richmond (1922), in his Work Social Diagnosis, introduced a holistic perspective that recognized the role of the environment in professional intervention, laying the foundations for a subsequent ecological perspective (Gordon, 1981). This transition represented a theoretical, epistemological and, particularly, practical challenge when considering communities' socioeconomic and political structures (Reyes & Rigg, 2019; Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.*, 2022).

Ecosocial or environmental Social Work is defined as a type that aids humanity, seeking to adapt Social Work methods, address the analysis of social problems, and promote social change employing an ecosocial paradigm or lens (Matthies & Närhi, 2016; Rambaree *et al.,* 2019; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017). According to Kim-Zapf (2022), Liévano (2013), and Rambaree *et al.* (2019), this approach is understood as a process, a worldview, and a set of principles that form part of the Social Work profession and that can apply to all contexts of research and practice. Ecosocial Work aims to promote the well-being of and social justice among the groups most affected by the ecosocial crisis (Krings *et al.,* 2018).

Miller *et al.* (2012) consider social justice the backbone of the profession and incorporate environmental justice into the intervention context. Thus, Social Work favors environmental justice and respect for environmental rights (Rambaree, 2020). In this context, professionals must collaborate to create new perspectives, knowledge, and skills to solve complex problems (Ramsay & Boddy, 2017); and the multilevel perspective, which allows us to understand the relationships between human beings and their environment through comprehensive and interdisciplinary interventions (Belchior-Rocha, 2017).

The ecosocial approach recognizes that economic, social, demographic, cultural, and religious factors shape the vulnerability of social groups (Djoudi *et al.,* 2016). In this regard, the historical link between the gender and ecological approaches is particularly noteworthy (Alston, 2013; Tapia, 2017), as women have been considered, over the years, a vulnerable group (Djoudi *et al.,* 2016). Also relevant are spiritual beliefs and cultural traditions, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Romanticism, among others, for their way of understanding life and interacting with the world and people.

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Ecosocial Work has gained notoriety over the past thirty years, particularly in North America and Western Europe. This concept recognizes the ecological, social, economic, and cultural dimensions from the theoretical standpoint of systems and an ecocritical perspective (Närhi & Matthies, 2016; Rambaree, 2024). Applied to Social Work, ecosocial Work encompasses diverse approaches, which specialized Social Work literature documents, such as: "Green Social Work", "Environmental Social Work", "Ecosocial Social Work", "Ecological Social Work", "Ecofeminist Social Work" and "Eco-spiritual Social Work" (Boetto, 2017; Dominelli, 2012; Gray et al., 2013; Jones, 2010; Millán-Franco, 2020; Peeters, 2012; Rambaree, 2024; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Stephens et al., 2010; Valdivia & Medina, 2024).

This concept refers to both the environment and the physical, ecological, environmental, social and sustainable spaces. That relates to some of the fundamental principles of Social Work, such as social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversity, established in Article 5 of its *Code of Ethics* (General Council of Social Work [GCSW], 2012).

In the field of Social Work, professionals associate this growth with other contemporary issues, such as human rights and sustainable development (Maglajlic, 2019; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017; Rovetta, 2022; Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.,* 2022). Its development has led to a new body of knowledge produced by authors specialized in the subject, who have delved deeper into its study and understanding (Coates & Besthorn, 2010; Coates, 2012; Gray & Coates, 2013; Gray *et al.,* 2013). This evolution encompasses the study of prominent topics such as ecology, the impact of the environmental crisis, and environmental justice (Boetto, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2015; Dominelli, 2012, 2013). In this regard, the reviews by Krings *et al.* (2018) and Bexell *et al.* (2019) show this growth, reflected in the increase in works published between 1995 and 2015 on issues related to natural disasters, environmental crises, natural resources, food security, and food justice in specific regions and in response to the needs of vulnerable groups. However, according to Bexell *et al.* (2019), these issues have not been adequately addressed, denoting a lack of connection between research and practice.

Social Work, committed to human and environmental well-being, is part of national and international agendas. It now constitutes a fundamental part of the Global Agenda for Social Work and Social Development (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2022), the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW), the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) and the International Council on Social Welfare (ICSW). The purpose of these entities regarding environmental issues is to unify efforts in favor of human rights, social justice and sustainable development (Truell *et al.,* 2017) and promote synergies between the Social Work profession, sustainability and respect for the environment, considering it an indissoluble and essential part of Social Work (Valdivia & Medina, 2024).

Context: the ecosocial approach in Higher Education and its relationship to sustainable development and Social Work training

As a discipline and profession committed to human rights and social justice, Social Work assumes an incipient role in addressing sustainable development and training in eco-social Work. The Global Agenda establishes environmental sustainability and sustainable development as fundamental principles of Social Work (Millán-Franco, 2020). These principles reflect a way of understanding Social Work, in its theory and practice. According to Rambaree (2024), sustainable development "is a holistic concept that requires multidimensional and multidisciplinary knowledge and approaches" (p. 24). The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2021) defines "sustainability" as "patterns and policies that establish solutions for the well-being of the entire ecosystem" and "development" as "a process of dynamic and inclusive change, within a person, group or society that pursues/seeks well-being for both people and the planet." By these concepts, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda (United Nations [UN], 2015) recognize the link between honoring human rights and addressing current social needs and problems (López-Carlassare & Palma-García, 2021).

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Given these connections, social professions face increasingly complex challenges affecting their practice. (Batle & Martínez, 2022). In Social Work, in particular, addressing these issues allows future social workers to face complex challenges, contextualizing the importance of the local environment in practice and promoting a holistic perspective that reinforces a sense of belonging and an ethical and sustainable perspective (Lievens, 2024). To this end, the curricula in Social Work incorporates a pedagogical, multifaceted and interdisciplinary approach (Millán-Franco, 2020; Rambaree *et al.*, 2019), recognized in the Global Agenda for Social Work (IASSW, 2022), the White Paper on Social Work Degree (National Agency for Quality Assessment and Accreditation [NAQAA], 2004), the Code of Ethics or the Global Declaration of Ethical Principles and Professional Integrity (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], and the General Assembly of the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2018).

In the context of Higher Education, training in Ecosocial Work is essential for the transformation of learning, through education based on diversity, intersubjectivity and interactions, and teaching that involves a change in traditional values, participation by people to achieve those changes, and critical reflection (Hernández *et al.*, 2009; Rambaree, 2024; Simsek, 2012). In this regard, Morales-Hernández *et al.* (2023) and Pérez-Martín and Bravo-Torija (2024) agree that schools are responsible for and a guarantor of social change by promoting education that contributes to the construction of a critical, committed, and participatory citizenship, one that recognizes the importance of ecosystems and their connection with social issues.

To this end, Higher Education provides the perfect scenario to incorporate these changes, at the same time being responsible for the achievement of the SDGs (Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge [MITECO, Spain] and Ministry of Education and Vocational Training [MEFP, Spain], 2021; UN, 2015) and for the training of professionals who can propose solutions based on principles of sustainability and development (Ramos-Torres, 2020). The United Nations underscores the importance of the ecosocial approach in training for citizenship (Bravo-Torija & Pérez-Martín, 2024) and, according to SDG 4 (Target 4.7), education seeks for students to acquire theoretical and practical knowledge for the promotion of sustainable development, and knowledge of social and environmental problems and their challenges (UN, 2015).

The role of universities is essential for this. Thus, according to Miñano and García-Haro (2020), universities seek to "provide students and university staff with the knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to address the complex challenges of sustainable development, articulated by the 2030 Agenda through any career or life trajectory they take" (p. 6). In addition, it seeks to include ecosocial content in the subjects, promote changes in educational processes, and facilitate the development of students' capacities and skills (Ramos-Torres, 2020).

In this regard, curricular skills pave the way for training professionals in ecosocial attitudes. According to UNESCO (2017, cited in Ramos-Torres, 2020, p. 96), cross-cutting competencies to

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achieve these objectives are: (1) systems thinking; (2) prevention; (3) normative knowledge; (4) innovation; (5) collaboration; (6) critical thinking; (7) self-awareness; and (8) complex problem solving.

Meanwhile, González-Reyes *et al.* (2021) identify as ecosocial proposals: (1) ecodependence (a balance between social and natural functioning); (2) knowledge of the functioning of the biosphere; (3) the civilizational crisis, (4) the training of agents for social change; (5) personal and balanced development with the planet; (6) social and environmental justice for the conservation of the planet; (7) active participation by citizens, and democratic development; and (8) the development of sustainable techniques.

In Spain, Article 45.1 of the Spanish Constitution (Constitución Española, 1978) establishes a regulatory framework that recognizes the interrelationship between human well-being and the conservation of the environment, stating that "everyone has the right to enjoy an environment suitable for the development of the person, as well as a duty to preserve it."

With regard to Education for Sustainable Development (ESD), the report of the Ministry for the Ecological Transition and the Demographic Challenge (Oliver-Trobat, 2005), which analyzes attitudes towards and perceptions of the environment among Spanish youth, states: on the one hand, as principles of environmental education (Awdurdod Cymwysterau, Cwricwlwm ac Asesu Cymru [ACCAC], 2002): (1) the interdependence between humanity, the environment and the economy, at all levels; (2) individual and collective citizen responsibility; (3) human needs and rights, and responsibility for the actions taken; (4) diversity and human, cultural, social and economic respect; (5) sustainable change; (6) global quality of life, equity and justice; (7) uncertainty and caution about possible paths towards sustainable development and global citizenship; (8) values and perceptions, critical evaluation and information; and (9) conflict resolution as a barrier to development, and the need for the pursuit of excellence, and risk (Oliver-Trobat, 2005). Finally, as values and attitudes towards change: (1) a sense of identity and self-esteem, (2) empathy, (3) a concern for social justice and equity, (4) valuing and respecting diversity, (5) concern for the environment and a commitment to sustainable development and (6) confidence in change (p. 20).

International scientific production extensively explores the relationship between the environment and education, analyzing the perceptions and attitudes of students and Social Work professionals regarding the environmental issue at universities worldwide, such as Sweden, Chile, Albania, New Zealand, Turkey, Finland, Australia, and the USA. (Arkert & Jacobs, 2023; Chonody & Sultzman, 2022; Chonody *et al.,* 2020; Decker *et al.,* 2019; Krings *et al.,* 2018; Lesić *et al.,* 2023; Nöjd *et al.,* 2023; Osmanaga, 2014; Özkan *et al.,* 2024; Rambaree, 2020; Reu & Jarldorn, 2023; Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.,* 2022; Yeung *et al.,* 2024; Yildirim *et al.,* 2021). In Spain, however, this type of study is scarcer, except some works, such as that by *Palavecinos et al.* (2016), which analyzes environmental concerns among university students, a work on the environmental

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perceptions of youth in Spain (Oliver-Trobat, 2005), and the recent study with university students by Aguiar *et al.* (2021).

These works point to contextual, geographical, economic, cultural, social and political factors when studying attitudes towards and perceptions of the environment. Regarding geographical scope, the place of origin and context shape how students perceive the environment (Marlow & Van-Rooyen, 2001, cited in Krings *et al.*, 2018). In this regard, another study associates place of origin with the political component (Rambaree *et al.*, 2019). Likewise, residing in vulnerable or rural areas also influences attitudes towards and recognition of the environmental sphere (Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.*, 2022). Regarding the public sphere, the economy or lifestyles of the place of origin do not negatively influence the environment (Rambaree *et al.*, 2019). Regarding the political sphere, another study associates environmental concern with a commitment to climate and pollution through participation in environmental programs, organizations and associations (Osmanaga, 2014).

About biological, social and cultural factors, we find works that recognize the connection with having attitudes towards the environment, without attaching importance to economic/religious components and the gender perspective (Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.*, 2022). However, beliefs, traditions and culture are considered components of ecological justice and the practice of Social Work (Yeung *et al.,* 2024). In this regard, Özkan *et al.* (2024) identify gender-based differences in attitudes towards the environment, with women showing more positive and sensitive attitudes than men. The pattern repeats in terms of those who participate in volunteer activities compared to those who do not. Students completing internships have less positive attitudes than those who are not. Age, gender and year of schooling, on the other hand, do not seem to be significant factors in the results of the study by Chonody & Olds (2022).

In the works of Nöjd *et al.* (2023), Reu & Jarldorn (2023) and Decker *et al.* (2019), on the one hand, we see that Social Work plays an important role in reducing environmental problems and climate change through personal and professional actions. However, we also notice a disconnect between theory and practice. On the other hand, political ideology, beliefs, training, and being well-informed about the environment positively influence pro-environmental attitudes. In this regard, Decker *et al.* (2019) indicate that, although environmental justice is important in Social Work, there is a lack of content and information about it.

In Spain, concern for the environment in the educational context of Social Work has not received as much attention. Current studies link responsibility for the environment to the need for changes in the personal behaviors and habits of Social Work students through actions in favor of socio-environmental sustainability (Aguiar *et al.,* 2021). In addition, there is a lack of theoretical knowledge about Ecocritical Social Work, little theoretical and practical training, and limited interest in further training on the environmental issue and the planet's future. In addition, studies show that women exhibit more pro-environmental behaviors than men (Palavecinos *et al.*, 2016).

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The studies found that students' perceptions reflect their experiences, context, identities, and personal, social, and demographic factors. All this influences their attitudes, what they perceive, and its impact on practice. This Work recognizes the growing relevance of the ecosocial approach in Social Work as a reflection of a paradigm shift at the global level, and its impact on academic and practical training. Its originality stems from how it explores and broadly covers a context that researchers had not studied until now: the University of Alicante and the Spanish context.

Considering the above, this study explores two issues, going beyond the specific context analyzed, but also the perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment among the Social Work students at the University of Alicante (Spain), and the relationship they perceive between the environment and Social Work.

2. Methodology

The main aim of this Work is to ascertain Social Work students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment, and how they view the relationship between the environment and Social Work. It also seeks to understand the associations and differences between these perceptions and attitudes and the students' sociodemographic characteristics.

Thus, the research questions were as follows:

1. What are students' perceptions and attitudes towards the environment?
2. What are students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work?
3. Are there differences in students' perceptions and attitudes based on sociodemographic characteristics?

Taking into account the objectives and questions of the study, a quantitative methodology was adopted for descriptive and explanatory purposes (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). This approach made it possible to collect and analyze data in a standardized way, quantify student responses, identify patterns and trends in their perceptions and attitudes, and recognize possible differences according to sociodemographic profiles.

The development of this methodology makes it possible to measure and analyze the contributions of the social work students at the University of Alicante (Spain) and draw comparisons with previous research, allowing for international debate and providing new perspectives in Ecosocial Work training.

Description of the participating population

The population consisted of pupils studying for the Degree in Social Work at the University of Alicante (Spain), enrolled in a compulsory, 6-credit (ECTS) "Social Work with Communities" (Code 19523) course during the 2022-2023 academic year. Because the research team had direct and sustained access to this population, they used non-probability convenience sampling. Although researchers commonly use this strategy in similar studies, it does not guarantee representation of the entire population of Social Work students. Therefore, readers should interpret the results within this framework.

Of the 129 students who completed the course's general syllabus, 102 participated in the study (79.1%). The researchers detail the students' profiles in Table 1.

The students were mainly female (82.4%), ages 20 to 49 (M=22.9; SD=4.53), and Spanish nationals (99.0%). Their main route to university was the standardized test for high school students (73.5%), followed by Vocational Training studies (21.6%).

Regarding religious beliefs, 31.4% described themselves as atheists; 23.5%, as non-practicing believers; 16.7%, agnostics; and 15.7%, spiritual non-believers. 8.8% stated they were unsure of their beliefs, and only 3.9% considered themselves practicing believers.

97.1% had not participated in movements, groups, or associations whose primary purpose was to conserve or protect the environment, and 92.2% were unaware of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) most linked to this issue.

Regarding their political positions, 73.5% identified as left-wing, falling from 1 to 4 on a 10-point scale, with one representing the far left and 10 representing the far right.

Table 1. Profiles of the participating students.

Characteristics		n	%
Gender			
	Female	84	82.4
	Male	18	17.6
	Other	0	0
Nationality1			
	Spanish	101	99.0

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1 Because there were not enough international students, the researchers excluded this variable from the subsequent explanatory analysis.

Non-EU Foreigner	1	1.0
EU Foreigner	0	0

Ethnic or cultural group

Yes	10	9.8
No	92	90.2

University access route

Test for high school students	75	73.5
Vocational studies	22	21.6
Test for students over age 25/40/45	1	1.0
Other	4	3.9

Religious beliefs

Practicing believer	4	3.9
Non-practicing believer	24	23.5
Spiritual, but not a believer	16	15.7
Atheist	32	31.4
Agnostic	17	16.7
I am not sure	9	8.8

Participation in movements or associations for environmental purposes2

Yes	3	2.9
No	99	97.1

Knowledge of environmental SDGs

Yes	8	7.8
No	94	92.2

Other characteristics	M	SD
Age	22.9	4.53
Political ideology	3.85	1.86

Source: own elaboration.

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2   Because too few students participated in environmental movements or associations, the researchers did not include this variable in the subsequent explanatory analysis.

Data collection and analysis procedure

The instrument used for data collection was an *ad hoc* questionnaire comprised of 11 questions and 23 measurement variables (nominal, ordinal, and scale). The questions were structured into three sections: (1) sociodemographic data; (2) perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment; and (3) perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work. To develop the second and third sections, 5-point Likert scales were used, with 1 being the minimum score (Strongly disagree) and 5 being the maximum score (Strongly agree). The items were designed and/or reviewed by the research team, which had extensive experience in Social Work and Social Services. In the first case, a questionnaire from Spain's Center for Sociological Research (CIS) on environmental awareness in the country was adapted (Study 28373). In the second case, some of the considerations by Dominelli (2012) and Rambaree *et al.* (2019), the researchers used socio-ecological development and ecosocial Work references. To present the results, they synthesized the gathered statements into their corresponding categories (Table 2).

Table 2. Descriptors of the perceptions and attitudes analyzed

Perception/Attitude	Descriptor
Towards the environment	
Environmental concern	I am concerned about environmental issues
Unsustainable development	The planet will be unable to withstand the current rate of human growth indefinitely.
Public liability	Public authorities must guarantee the protection of the environment
Environmental prioritization	Environmental protection must be a priority, even if it entails high costs or impinges on individual rights.
The effectiveness of environmental education	As opposed to coercive measures such as fines, education is the most effective way to get people to protect the environment.
Flora and fauna rights	Plants and animals have the same right to exist as people.
A lifestyle change	I am willing to change my lifestyle to protect the environment if necessary.
Environmental commitment	I recycle, buy eco-friendly products, reduce car use, save energy and water, and avoid certain products for environmental reasons.
On the relationship between the environment and Social Work	

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3   https://www.cis.es/detalle-ficha-estudio?origen=estudio&idEstudio=11404

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The environment as a subject of intervention	Social Work must include the environment as a subject of intervention, not only as the context in which people live.
The promotion of ecosocial values	Social Work must contribute to fostering the conditions for developing eco-social values such as solidarity, justice, equity, and freedom.
Transdisciplinary teamwork	Social workers must work on transdisciplinary teams, upholding their members' plural experiences and knowledge to achieve common objectives through new theoretical and methodological frameworks.
Analysis of oppressive structures	Social workers must analyze the oppressive structures that affect people, be aware of their positions, and determine how they can reinforce such structures.
Training with an ecosocial perspective	The ecosocial perspective must be part of Social Work training to bring about effective social interventions.
Training in Ecosocial Work	My current academic training in social Work has prepared me to carry out interventions from an eco-social perspective.

Source: own elaboration.

The questionnaire was reviewed by three Social Work and Social Services experts, with a proven track record in university teaching and research. They evaluated two aspects: the items' clarity and their relevance. After incorporating their suggestions, the researchers conducted a pilot test with 11 students from the previous academic year and found no need for further adjustments before the final application.

Scores on the scales of perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment and perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and social Work showed good reliability, with Cronbach's alpha of 0.87 and 0.72, respectively.

The researchers digitized the questionnaire and distributed it via Google Forms. They collected the data between 17 and 28 April 2023. To ensure the study's ethical principles, they obtained informed consent from the participating students before collecting the data. Throughout the process, they guaranteed the anonymity of the responses and the voluntary nature of participation.

Data analysis was univariate and bivariate, using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) program, V. 25. In the first case, the researchers analyzed absolute and relative frequencies, as well as central tendency and dispersion statistics (mean, median, standard deviation, and range) to answer research questions 1 and 2. In the second case, they examined the relationships between variables using the Mann-Whitney and Kruskal-Wallis U tests and the Spearman Rho

correlation coefficient to address research question 3. They chose these non-parametric tests because of the sample size, the ordinal nature of the study's main variables (perceptions and attitudes), and the comparative and correlational objectives (Rubin & Babbie, 2014; Siebert & Siebert, 2018).

3. Findings
3.1 Students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment

Generally, Social Work students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment were favorable (Table 3). The participants expressed the most significant degree of agreement with the following aspects, in descending order: (1) unsustainable development (M=4.37; SD=0.84); (2) public responsibility (M=4.19; SD=0.86); (3) environmental concern (M=3.97; SD=0.98); (4) environmental prioritization (M=3.86; SD=1.13) and (5) the effectiveness of environmental education (M=3.61; SD=1.14). In contrast, the participants expressed lower degrees of agreement with the following aspects: (1) lifestyle change (M=3.34; SD=1.00); (2) flora and fauna rights (M=3.03; SD=0.84); and (3) ecological commitment (M=2.91; SD=0.89). This last fact is significant: students show positive perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment, *but these do translate into everyday actions* such as recycling, buying green products, or reducing car use, among others.

Table 3. Perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment

	Mean	SD	Median	Range
Environmental concern	3.97	0.98	4.00	4
Unsustainable development	4.37	0.84	5.00	4
Public responsibility	4.19	0.86	4.00	4
Environmental prioritization	3.86	1.13	4.00	4
The effectiveness of environmental education	3.61	1.14	4.00	4
Flora and fauna rights	3.03	0.84	3.00	4
Lifestyle change	3.34	1.00	3.00	4
Environmental commitment	2.91	0.89	3.00	4

Source: own elaboration (2024).

By gender, the researchers found significant differences in some students' perceptions and attitudes: (1) environmental concern (U=481.0; p<0.05); (2) unsustainable development (U=501.5; p<0.05); and (3) public responsibility (U=432.5; p<0.05). In all three cases, female students showed a greater degree of agreement.

Regarding religious belief, only the effectiveness of environmental education (H=11.2918; p<0.05) featured significant differences. Believing students (practicing or not) showed a lower degree of agreement about this question (M=3.00; SD=1.19) than the rest (M=3.84; SD=1.03).

Concerning political ideology, significant differences were found between all the students' perceptions and attitudes, except in the case of unsustainable development: (1) environmental concern (rho= -0.304; p<0.05); (2) public responsibility (rho=-0.224; p<0.05); (3) environmental prioritization (rho= -0.234; p<0.05); (4) the effectiveness of environmental education (rho=-0.371; p<0.05); (5) flora and fauna rights (rho=-0.302; p<0.05); (6) lifestyle change (rho= -0.284; p<0.05); and (7) ecological commitment (rho= -0.387; p<0.05). In all cases, left-wing students showed a greater degree of agreement.

In contrast, the researchers did not find statistically significant differences based on age, ethnic or cultural group, route to university, or knowledge of the SDGs.

The associations between perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment were also analyzed. The data showed the existence of low to moderate intensity correlations between all of them (Table 4). The highest correlations were found, on the one hand, between unsustainable development and public responsibility (rho=0.687; p<0.05), and, on the other, between public responsibility and environmental prioritization (rho=0.669; p<0.05).

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Table 4. Matrix of correlations: perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6	A7	A8
A1	1							
A2	0.599*	1						
A3	0.597*	0.687*	1					
A4	0.565*	0.669*	0.545*	1				
A5	0.406*	0.466*	0.427*	0.315*	1			
A6	0.383*	0.284*	0.342*	0.313*	0.247*	1		
A7	0.427*	0.557*	0.526*	0.527*	0.471*	0.521*	1	
A8	0.378*	0.360*	0.449*	0.205*	0.403*	0.452*	0.564*	1

Note: * p<0.05. Statements. A1. Environmental concern A2. Unsustainable development A3. Public responsibility A4. Environmental prioritization A5. The effectiveness of environmental education A6. Flora and fauna rights A7 Lifestyle change. A8. Environmental commitment.

Source: own elaboration (2024).

3.2 Students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work

Generally speaking, the students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work were favorable (Table 5). The participants expressed the most significant degree of agreement with the following aspects, in descending order: (1) analysis of oppressive structures (M=4.47; SD=0.73); (2) the promotion of ecosocial values (M=4.24; SD=0.79); (3) transdisciplinary teamwork (M=3.92; SD=0.86); (4) the environment as an intervention subject (M=3.75; SD=0.83); and (5) training with an ecosocial perspective (M=3.51; SD=0.90). The only aspect with a lower degree of agreement was training in ecosocial Work (M=2.20; SD=0.89). This last result indicates that, even though they recognize the importance of the ecosocial approach in Social Work, students do not perceive that their current training provides the necessary tools to apply it. *Ergo*, it is not so much a contradiction on their part as a lack of the curricular structure or the educational offerings presented.

Table 5. Perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work

	Mean	SD	Median	Range
The environment as a subject of intervention	3.75	0.83	4.00	4
The promotion of ecosocial values	4.24	0.79	4.00	4
Transdisciplinary teamwork	3.92	0.86	4.00	4
Analysis of oppressive structures	4.47	0.73	5.00	4
Training with an ecosocial perspective	3.51	0.90	3.00	4
Training in Ecosocial Work	2.20	0.89	2.00	4

Source: own elaboration (2024).

By gender, the researchers found significant differences in some students' perceptions and attitudes: (1) the promotion of ecosocial values (U= 1,006.0; p<0.05); (2) transdisciplinary teamwork (U= 1,159.0; p<0.05); and (3) training with an ecosocial perspective (U=1,055.0; p<0.05). In all three cases, female students exhibited a greater degree of agreement.

According to political ideology, the researchers found significant differences in two of the students' perceptions and attitudes: (1) the environment as an intervention subject (rho=-0.317; p<0.05) and (2) training with an ecosocial perspective (rho=-0.346; p<0.05). In all cases, left-wing students demonstrated a greater degree of agreement.

Regarding knowledge of the SDGs, only the promotion of ecosocial values (U=221.0; p<0.05) displayed significant differences. Students who were familiar with the SDGs of a

markedly environmental nature showed a higher degree of agreement with this issue (M=4.75; SD=0.46) than the rest (M=4.19; SD=0.79).

In contrast, the researchers did not find statistically significant differences based on age, ethnic or cultural group, route to university, or knowledge of the SDGs.

The associations between perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work were also analyzed. The data showed the existence of low to moderate intensity correlations between practically all of them (Table 6). The researchers found the highest correlations between: (1) the promotion of ecosocial values and the analysis of oppressive structures (rho=0.576; p<0.05); (2) the environment as a subject of intervention and training with an ecosocial perspective (rho=0.554; p<0.05); and (3) the promotion of ecosocial values and transdisciplinary teamwork (rho=0.505; p<0.05).

Table 6. Correlation matrix: perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work.

	A1	A2	A3	A4	A5	A6
A1	1					
A2	0.270*	1				
A3	0.400*	0.505*	1			
A4	0.187*	0.576*	0.330*	1		
A5	0.554*	0.299*	0.380*	0.182*	1	
A6	0.150*	0.028*	-0.071*	0.137*	0.126*	1

Note: * p<0.05. Statements. A1. The environment as a subject of intervention A2. The promotion of ecosocial values A3. Transdisciplinary teamwork A4. Analysis of oppressive structures A5. Training with an ecosocial perspective A6. Training in Ecosocial Work

Source: own elaboration (2024).

4. Conclusions

The results of the study reflect that the ecosocial approach is recognized by the Social Work students at the University of Alicante, in keeping with the literature that highlights the importance of incorporating it into Social Work training and practice (Aguiar *et al.,* 2021; Bexell *et al.,* 2019; Chonody & Olds, 2022; Krings *et al.*, 2018; Molyneux, 2010; Reu & Jarldorn, 2023; Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.*, 2022). In general terms, students exhibit favorable perceptions of and attitudes towards the environment, and show concern regarding environmental problems, recognizing the unsustainability of the current rate of human growth, the need for public authorities to guarantee protection of the environment, and the importance of prioritizing environmental protection over potential economic costs, or avoiding any impingement of

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individual rights. In addition, they value the effectiveness of education over coercion in this area. These overall results are consistent with those yielded by previous research (Aguiar *et al.,* 2021; Nöjd *et al.,* 2023; Osmanaga, 2014; Özkan *et al.,* 2024; Palavecinos *et al.,* 2016; Yeung *et al.,* 2024). The need to prioritize the environment, although it may entail costs, for example, is consistent with studies that advocate for eco-dependence; that is, striking a balance between the functioning of society and nature (González *et al.,* 2021). Regarding public responsibility, it would be helpful to gauge in greater depth what students understand by this concept (Oliver-Trobat, 2005), how they conceive of the relationship between people and nature within that public responsibility (Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2017; Bowles *et al.*, 2018), as well as what implications it generates in terms of rights and duties (ACCAC, 2002; CGTS, 2012; Marlow & Van-Rooyen, 2001; Oliver-Trobat, 2005).

In contrast, aspects such as recognizing the rights of animals and plants, a willingness to modify one's lifestyle to protect the environment, and carrying out actions such as recycling, buying eco-friendly products, and reducing car use, obtain lower scores. One can interpret that as a dissonance between intellectual environmental concerns, concrete behaviors, ethical ideals, and actual actions. This result ratifies the idea, supported by works such as those by Aguiar *et al.* (2021) and Yeung *et al.* (2024), that there is room for improvement regarding students' practices in favor of the environment. As in the study by Rambaree *et al.* (2020), lifestyle is perceived as a less determining factor when it comes to ecological commitment.

The students' perceptions of and attitudes towards the relationship between the environment and Social Work are also favorable. Students prioritize two key issues from a preventive and mobilizing perspective (Parra & Prat, 2024; UNESCO, 2017). On the one hand, analysis of the oppressive structures that affect people, including awareness of the position of the professional and how it can contribute to strengthening such structures; and, on the other, the creation of the conditions necessary to develop eco-social values, such as solidarity, justice, equity and freedom. The current contexts of Social Work intervention call for critical professionals capable of imagining and formulating responses consistent with these ecosocial values to address the problems faced by people and communities (Dominelli, 2012; Parra & Prats, 2024; Rambaree *et al.,* 2019).

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Similarly, transdisciplinary teamwork is recognized as relevant, underlining the need to uphold a plurality of experiences and knowledge to achieve common objectives through new theoretical and methodological frameworks. Given the complexity of today's world, articulating the knowledge of diverse disciplines is desirable and necessary for ecosocial Work (Belchior-Rocha, 2017; Nöjd *et al.,* 2023; Rambaree *et al.,* 2019; Ramsay & Boddy, 2017), since it is at these intersections where the most integral and transformative reflection and action emerge.

According to the students, Social Work must include the environment as a subject of intervention and not only as the context in which people live; that is, it must abandon an anthropocentric and individualistic perspective to adopt a holistic and ecological one (Belchior-

Rocha, 2017; Bell, 2012; Boetto, 2017; Bowles *et al.*, 2018; Parra & Prat, 2024). To this end, the ecosocial perspective must be an explicit part of Social Work training (Nöjd *et al.,* 2023), since, although it is inherent in the discipline at all levels of intervention (Kim-Zapf, 2022; Liévano, 2013; Rambaree *et al.*, 2019; Valdivia & Medina, 2024), and forms part of its ethics, values and foundations, principles, rights and responsibilities (CGTS, 2012), it is not fully integrated into its praxis (Gray & Coates, 2013; Krings *et al.*, 2018; Molyneux, 2010). That makes it challenging to address socio-environmental problems that affect people unequally and demand contextualized interventions in the physical and ecological spheres (Dominelli, 2012; Gómez-Francisco, 2015; Gray *et al.,* 2013; Kim-Zapf, 2022).

About the above, Social Work students identify a shortcoming in their training: it does not prepare them to carry out interventions with an ecosocial perspective, this being a flaw already indicated in previous research (Aguiar *et al.,* 2021; Reu & Jarldorn, 2023; Yeung *et al.*, 2024). That can range from theoretical knowledge to practical skills, attitudes and values.

Almost all the students lack participative experience in movements, groups, or associations with environmental purposes, in addition to not being aware of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the United Nations 2030 Agenda, which are directly related to the environment. However, they show favorable perceptions of and attitudes towards it. That suggests two issues: on the one hand, it diverges from the results of studies, such as that by Özkan *et al.* (2024), in which aspects of this type are related to more positive and sensitive positions; and, on the other, it points to a latent debate about the difference between having ecosocial attitudes and participating in ecosocial activities (Palavecinos *et al.,* 2016). Following Osmanaga (2014), the former could be related to a sense of identity, while the latter could be related to personal or professional behaviors and attitudes towards the environment.

Most Social Work students identify as female and align with left-wing political ideologies, characteristics that tend to foster more pro-environmental perceptions and attitudes (Chonody & Olds, 2022; Özkan *et al.,* 2024; Palavecinos *et al.,* 2016).

In contrast, the students' religious beliefs, concurring with the study by Sepúlveda-Hernández *et al.* (2022), did not significantly impact the results. Sociodemographic factors such as age, ethnic/cultural group, and university access route also did not have a notable influence either, in line with what was reported by Chonody and Olds (2022).

Regarding the limitations of this study, it is worth noting the homogeneous composition of the sample in terms of the geographical context studied and the participants' gender. The researchers also limited the study by choosing the quantitative method as the only research approach.

The researchers conclude that incorporating the ecosocial approach into Social Work training is important, to provide teaching and learning that facilitates the training of future social workers, instilling in them an understanding of environmental problems so that they can face complex challenges, develop interventions that connect their practices with local contexts, and experience a holistic sense of belonging and interconnection through ethical and sustainable relationships.

This study assesses recognition of the environment as a subject of intervention, integrating it into the theoretical and practical training of Social Work. The researchers emphasize that establishing the necessary conditions to achieve this requires incorporating a transdisciplinary perspective that includes individual and collective responsibilities and commitments. The educational context highlights the need to recognize the importance of education to the environment and sustainable development, its integration into practice, and the responsibilities and rights it encompasses.

Finally, the researchers propose three actions to promote this perspective and strengthen it in the field of Social Work: first, expand the sample of participants, including other Spanish universities to obtain more general results; second, explicitly transmit that ecosocial Work must be incorporated into theoretical Social Work training and practice; and third, make students and teachers of Social Work aware of ecosocial Work's important relationship to the exercise of the profession. Finally, the researchers recognize the students' experiences and the importance of the environment in understanding the ecosocial context.

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