

Expanding the field: Animals and social work

Carole Adamson and Simon Lowe

In calling for articles related to social work and animals, the ANZSW journal invited contributions from what has become a wide-ranging field of social work spanning animal rights, the human–animal bond (HAB), and animal-assisted activities, interventions and therapies. This issue contains the first collection of articles, with more to follow.

Central to positioning animals within the professional gaze of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is the significant change within the new *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019). The final ethical principle of Manaakitanga in the code is:

We recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected.

The inclusion of animal sentience, and its imperative for seeing human beings (social workers included) in relationship to other animals, follows the same recognition of animal status within the Animal Welfare Amendment Act (2015). Globally, these shifts in perception regarding the human–animal relationship parallel recent court decisions regarding the rights of the natural world (La Follette & Maser, 2019) and, specifically relevant in Aotearoa New Zealand, the *personhood* of rivers (Argyrou & Hummels, 2019). Overall, these legal statements reflect a sea change in the construction of values about the relationship of human beings to the rest of the natural world. The One Health concept (Destoumieux-Garzón et al., 2018) sets out a platform for the integration of human health, animal health, plant health, ecosystems' health and biodiversity as an aspirational statement that represents much

current thinking about the status of our planet. The ANZASW *Code of Ethics* (2019) is an articulation of social work values within this purview; this issue considers how animal-inclusive knowledge and practice might also inform social work.

We are practising and learning about social work at a time when a shift in values is apparent, from regarding humans at the top of the hierarchy in the natural world, with *our* needs holding dominion over all other living beings, to a profound interconnectedness appreciated, protected and sustained by indigenous and traditional societies globally, but eroded and undermined by economic forces manifesting in urbanisation, industrialisation and commodification of the natural world for profit. This understanding of the interconnectedness of all things is not the exclusive domain of indigenous societies although, in Aotearoa New Zealand, it is Māori who have been the kaitiaki and standard-bearers for holistic perspectives in the face of scientific and economic systems that have separated humans from a recognition of their interdependence on nature. Nevertheless, the notions of *dominion* and *domination* suggest an intersectional relationship between processes of colonisation on one hand, and the nature of the human relationship with animals on the other.

Covid-19 is a case in point. At the time of publication, we are currently embedded in a series of lockdowns and pandemic management levels following a worldwide coronavirus outbreak. The global response to Covid-19 has raised considerable issues for social work over human rights, the implications of which are likely to have

generational impact. However, as to *non-human* rights, world attention is currently at a minimal level. The virus, spreading so easily from human to human, has been profiled by governments and media as a health and economic disaster *for humans*. There is little recognition of, or dynamic response to, the zoonotic (animal to human) link in the origins of the outbreak despite considerable evidence that this pandemic (as many others) originated in a wet market, this one in Wuhan, China (Riou & Althaus, 2020). Both living and dead animals from farmed and wild sources are sold in wet markets, where cross-species transmission can easily occur (Woo, Lau, & Yuen, 2006). This highlights the intimate inter-relationship between animals and humans: the consumption of animals by humans, the trade in exotic animals as commodities, and human attitudes to the care and wellbeing of animals. These issues, it can be argued, are intrinsically rights issues for us to consider, ones that expand our gaze from humans to the nature of our relationship with animals.

Even without a virus-infused lens, we need to consider human–animal relationships from a rights-based perspective. The implications of regarding animals as sentient beings puts on our agenda issues of consumption, commodification, welfare and relationship (for instance, Evans & Gray, 2012). It provides an imperative to practise social work from an animal-inclusive standpoint, one that (as depicted in Figure 1), represents a shift away from seeing animals as secondary in rank to humans, towards an inclusive stance which forces us to reconsider how we see and relate to companion animals, farmed animals and those remaining in the wild.

Positioning ourselves at different points on this continuum allows us to tease out strands of our relationship with other animals, both within and outside of the profession of social work. Through the processes of recognising that animals have feelings, can sense pain and make choices (see, for instance, Marino & Merskin, 2019), our perception of human rights in relation

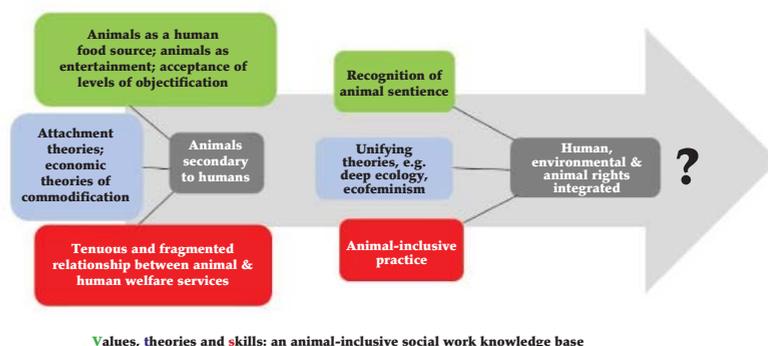


Figure 1. A continuum of human–animal relationships.

to animal rights may shift from seeing human rights as a core mandate of social work whilst still seeing animal rights and activism as being still somewhat of a fringe activity that sits uncomfortably in a nation still reliant on animal-based food production (Adamson & Darroch, 2016). As Evans and Gray (2012) challenge us, “is it enough that we don’t eat our co-workers?”

So why should we, as social workers, pay attention to animals? Our IFSW / IASSW Global definition, after all, refers to people and not to animals (IFSW, 2014). An animal-inclusive gaze can tell us more about us as human beings, including issues of attachment, abuse, and disaster, and the role that companion animals play in wellbeing, shaping our behaviour as they are, in turn, influenced by us. The development of the SPCA Targeted Interventions Portal (<https://spcatargetedinterventions.nz/>), the establishment of Animal Evac, a charity assisting animals (and therefore their people) in times of disaster (<https://www.animalevac.nz/>) and the ANZASW Practice Note on Animal in Social Work Practice (developed by Nicole Robertson and the ANZASW Animals Interest Group) reflect the growing recognition of the impact of the HAB and the implications when this breaks down. Other stances represented within this issue and the broader literature capture some elements (underpinned by our understanding of attachment theory amongst other perspectives) of how animals can contribute to wellbeing and can assist us

in learning and healing, such as in Michele's Jarldorn's research report on the benefits of companion animal relationships for formerly incarcerated women. A social justice lens in the article by Atsuko Matsuoka, John Sorenson, Taryn Mary Graham and Jasmine Ferreira reminds us that housing provision for older adults with companion animals is not just a resourcing issue, but intersectional institutional oppression. Other examples of the positive benefits of the HAB are through animal-assisted activities such as rest home visits; animal-assisted interventions (such as equine-human interactions described by Leitz and Napan in this issue); and animal-assisted therapies. All of the following articles therefore shine some light on the key question: what is the relationship between social work and animals?

First up in this collection is an article by Polly Yeung, Nicole Robertson and Lucy Sandford-Reed, reporting on research conducted with social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand regarding their familiarity with, and level of knowledge of, practice using the HAB within social work intervention. They highlight the gap between, on one hand, the high levels of awareness regarding both the positives of human-animal interaction and its negative aspects such as domestic violence, and on the other hand, the scarcity of guidelines and training that can ethically support the incorporation of animals within social work practice. Locating their findings on the continuum of human-animal relationships in Figure 1, we can see that this foundational research suggests a huge need for the sentiment for, and practice of, involving animals within social work to be supported by training, guidelines and ethical codes of practice. Without these, the lack of structural and organisational support for animal-inclusive social work practice puts both human and animal welfare at risk.

Nik Taylor, Heather Fraser, and Damien Riggs's article makes the case for companion animal-inclusive domestic violence service delivery, discusses the implications for the domestic violence and wider social service

fields, and challenges the assumptions that have been made within the previous, human-exclusive focus of health and social service practice. Making a separation between human- and animal-directed violence, they argue, is not only anthropocentric but not the best social work practice, given the presence of companion animals in 64% of households in Aotearoa New Zealand. These recommendations corroborate the findings of Yeung, Robertson, and Sandford-Reed's research, from the perspective of social work interventions in domestic violence as opposed to animal-assisted interventions and therapy. Beyond highlighting the dynamic relationship between humans, companion animals and abuse, the strength of the article is in its consideration of practice, policy and procedures, and the importance of including animals in social work education and post-qualifying training. The authors position themselves in a perspective towards the right-hand side of the continuum in Figure 1, suggesting that animal-inclusive practice in domestic violence moves beyond seeing such abuse only through an anthropocentric lens but, instead, recognising the impact of domestic violence on the sentient beings who share our homes.

Interspecies social justice issues are continued in the article on older people with companion animals and their housing needs. Atsuko Matsuoka, John Sorenson, Taryn Mary Graham, and Jasmine Ferreira suggest justice for companion animals underpins the social justice needs of older people seeking adequate rental housing, and that classism and speciesism contribute to the struggles of older people seeking to be housed along with the animals that share their lives. Kainga Ora, the social housing agency for Aotearoa New Zealand, now enables people to include their companion animals on their tenancy agreement where previously, a companion animal had to be identified as an assistance animal for the physical or emotional needs of their companion human. The restrictions on those seeking to live with companion animals in private rental accommodation remains.

A case study in equine-assisted learning is provided by Leitz and Napan as an example of how animal–human relationships can enhance human wellbeing. The authors suggest that, through relationship with animals, people experiencing violence, abuse and trauma can safely explore issues of trust, relationship and interdependence. Whilst focusing exclusively on the benefits to humans (and therefore, reflective of only one side of the human–animal relationship), the article explores the perceived sensory, physical, emotional and behavioural as well as relational benefits of interacting with horses, as experienced by participants at this equine centre north of Auckland.

Two rich research reports and a practice viewpoint supplement this issue’s focus on human–animal relationships and their importance to social work. Jarldorn’s study with formerly imprisoned women concerned the factors that we need to understand about imprisonment and release into the community, and found that relationship and connection were the significant factors for a successful re-adjustment into community living. The study had produced an unanticipated finding—that for many of the women, their relationships of importance were with their companion animals rather than humans, echoing Leitz and Napan’s suggestion that, for people who have had trust in humans damaged by life experiences and trauma, animal relationships can provide necessary non-judgmental affirmation. From a social work education perspective, Letitia Meadows, Karen Howieson, Tessa Bashford and Brooke Silke-Atkins consider the benefits of animal-assisted intervention both on students and young people, in their reflections on youth work placements involving animals. Nerilee Ceatha’s research report provides us with a reflective account of the parallel experiences

of writing a PhD and the experience of living with a rescue dog, framed up within theory and methodology underpinned by the ethics of *learning with* those with whom you have a connection. Her summary provides a fitting conclusion to this editorial:

By attending to our relations with all living beings and ‘learning with’ companion-animals, we can become better social workers, researchers and human beings.

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Carole Adamson ceadamson@hotmail.com

Simon Lowe simon.lowe@waikato.ac.nz