

Aotearoa New Zealand social workers and their views of inclusion of animals in social work practice – A descriptive study

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ABSTRACT

PURPOSE: Given the benefits of the human–animal bond (HAB), animals are being used in a range of social work settings. It is important to gain a more in-depth understanding of social work practitioners' knowledge and actions in these interactions. The purpose of this study was to examine the views and knowledge of social workers in relation to the HAB in Aotearoa New Zealand.

METHODS: A survey using an online portal was administrated to qualified social workers via professional and community networks to assess their exposure, level of knowledge, support, training, and barriers to animal–human relations.

RESULTS: A total of 140 questionnaires were used for analysis. The results, similar to findings from Canada and the United States, indicate that social workers seemed to have high exposure to information about the benefits of HAB and understanding of the connections between animal abuse and child abuse/domestic violence. Only 68% have included animals in their social work practice. The vast majority have had no specific training in HAB. Untested or untrained animals were also reported to have been used in social work intervention practice. The lack of clear workplace policies, support and professional training in HAB were key barriers that inhibited the inclusion of animals in practice.

CONCLUSIONS: Lack of understanding over how to include HAB in practice has serious implications for social work. HAB continues to influence and contribute to the lives of families and individuals and social workers have a duty to develop general awareness and knowledge of the benefits to human health and wellbeing of interacting with animals.

KEYWORDS: Human–animal bonds; social work practice; animal-human relations; social justice

The human–animal bond has received growing interest in recent years (e.g., Holcombe, Strand, Nugent, & Ng, 2016; Krause-Parello, Gulick, & Basin, 2019; Payne et al., 2015; Payne, DeAraugo, Bennett, & McGreevy, 2016). Bonding between animals and their human caregivers has been shown in numerous studies to improve human emotional and physical health (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suthers-McCabe,

2003; Friedmann & Son, 2009; Walsh, 2009; Wells, 2019). In Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), there are at least 4.6 million companion animals and 64% of households are home to at least one companion animal (New Zealand Companion Animal Council Inc., 2016). Pets and/or companion animals are no longer considered just as a member of the family (Risley-Curtiss, 2007) and are perceived as sources of social support

AOTEAROA
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potentially reducing their caregiver's reactivity to stressful situations (Allen, Blosscovich, & Mendes, 2002; Taylor & Fraser, 2017). Companion animals and other animals are increasingly included in animal-assisted intervention (AAI) or animal-assisted therapy (AAT) as therapeutic agents to treat physical, mental and behavioural disorders for children, young people, adults and older adults, such as depression, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, schizophrenia, alcohol/drug addiction, trauma and chronic diseases (e.g., Fraser, Taylor, & Signal, 2017; Gan, Hill, Yeung, Keesing, & Netto, 2019; Gee, Mueller, & Curl, 2017; O'Haire, Guerin, & Kirkham, 2015; Schuck et al., 2018; Taylor, Fraser, Signal, & Prentice, 2016; Uglow, 2019). Fine (2010) provides a succinct compilation and discussion on how AAI/AAT can offer therapeutic benefits for social work clients. The presence of animals in therapy sessions can provide a bridge into therapeutic alliances as clients may find it easier to engage with an animal before forming a trusting and working relationship with a therapist, particularly for children and people with a history of abuse and trauma (Geist, 2011; Thompson & Gullone, 2006).

While a substantial amount of research has supported the powerful relationships between humans and companion animals and other animals from a positive perspective, companion animals are also victims of human cruelty (Arkow, 2019; Ascione, Weber, & Wood, 1997; Gallagher, Allen, & Jones, 2008; Holcombe et al., 2016). In 1987, cruelty to animals was added as a criterion for conduct disorder in the American Psychiatric Association's Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Arkow, 2019). Further studies continue to confirm the growing evidence of a link between animal cruelty, child maltreatment, domestic violence, elder abuse and increased criminality with child and adult animal cruelty (Arkow, 2015; Ascione, 2005; Ascione & Shapiro, 2009; Faver & Strand, 2003, 2008; Flynn, 2011; Humphrey, 2002; Long et al., 2007).

Despite the prolific research correlating interpersonal violence, family violence, and child and adult animal cruelty mentioned, the benefits of cross-sector reporting continue to be hindered by the separation of animal and human welfare when it comes to intervention (Long, Long, & Kulkarni, 2007). This disconnection ignores animal abuse being an indicator of human violence that often exists concurrently with domestic violence (Faver & Strand, 2003) which has become a serious public health issue. In recent times, a *One Welfare* approach has also been established to complement the *One Health* approach, which focuses on the interconnections between animal welfare, human wellbeing and the environment in order to improve ways of working in a more integrated approach to achieve better animal welfare and human wellbeing globally (Pinillos et al., 2016).

Professionals in many disciplines, such as veterinarians, are now more aware of the link between animal abuse and human violence and several commentaries and reviewed articles have discussed the importance of active participation of these professionals in the cycle of violence (Benetato, Reisman, & McCobb, 2011; Lockwood & Arkow, 2016; Robertson, 2010). Despite scientific publications that have shown an association between animal abuse and interpersonal violence, and that animal abuse is an indicator of other forms of violence (Arkow, 2019; Flynn, 2000), studies in Australia, NZ and the USA reported that veterinarians were still reluctant to report cases of animal abuse (Donley, Patronek, & Luke, 1999; Green & Gullone, 2005; Williams, Dale, Clarke, & Garrett, 2008). Moreover, despite the recognition of the existence of the link between animal abuse and family violence in veterinary medicine, only around 50% of respondents in Australia, NZ and the USA reported to have felt responsible for the human victim of violence (Green & Gullone, 2005; Sharpe & Wittum, 1999; Williams et al., 2008). Although veterinarians can play a key role in detecting animal abuse and intervening

in different types of human violence, research has also reported barriers such as the lack of training to identify animal abuse (Sharpe & Wittum, 1999); lack of clarity in definitions of abuse, cruelty and neglect (Green & Gullone, 2005); lack of resources to help victims (Williams et al., 2008); lack of information regarding legal rights and responsibilities toward the victims of abuse (Sharpe & Wittum, 1999); and, lack of professional education about preventing animal abuse and human violence (Green & Gullone, 2005).

Social work has been connected to human–animal issues in practice for over 30 years starting with Gerda Bikales (1975) who called for consideration of human–animal relationships into intervention planning. Emeritus Professor Christina Risley-Curtiss in the USA has advocated for many years for social workers to focus on human–animal interactions to address the social support role of companion animals for individuals and within family systems, the connection between animal cruelty and violence towards humans, and the therapeutic benefits of companion animals (Risley-Curtiss, 2007, 2010, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Kodeine, 2011; Strand & Risley-Curtiss, 2013). This has, however, historically been a challenge for social work, as Sable (1995) argued that the social work literature has given little attention to the research or theoretical explanation of the human–animal bond while other social work scholars (e.g., Arkow, 2019; Ryan, 2011) have criticised social work training and practice and the focus solely on humans, which limits a holistic response to other inhabitants in the shared eco-system (Hanrahan, 2011; Ryan, 2011). While some social work literature has advocated for social workers' responsibility to attend to the welfare of animals as part of their code of ethics and practice (O'Brien, 2003; Wolf, 2000), social work as a discipline is still struggling to solidify and professionalise the integration of animals into social work theory and practice (Fraser et al., 2017; Strand et al., 2012).

Veterinary social work (VSW), developed by Dr Elizabeth Strand from the University of Tennessee (Jackson, 2013), has pioneered the intersection between veterinary medicine and social work practice. VSW focuses on the human side of the human–animal bond through four key areas: grief and loss of an animal, compassion fatigue in the animal service fields, the link between animal abuse and human violence, and animal-assisted intervention (Holcombe et al., 2016). If animals and social work have been connected for decades, it is very likely that social workers already work with individuals who have valued relationships with animals, rather than simply as tools in a therapeutic sense (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2006) and therefore, discussions around the inclusion of animals in social work practice should not just apply to those involved with VSW but be addressed in social work education programmes and curricula (Taylor et al., 2016; Tedeschi et al., 2006). A recent research by Chalmers et al. (2020) suggested the application of zooeyia within social work as one approach to understand HAB. Zooeyia refers to positive impacts on human health from the HAB, which includes the physical, psychological, social and spiritual health benefits from the interactions with animals, particularly with companion animals (Hodgson & Darling, 2011). Operating from the profession's ecological, strengths-based or family-centred perspective, which requires one to look at people in social and natural environments, social work researchers, educators, and practitioners can join other disciplines to incorporate human–animal relationships into their work to enhance the professional's ability to help clients and animals (Risley-Curtiss, 2007). However, studies conducted in the USA (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, Kawam, 2013) and in Canada (Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013) reported significant gaps within social workers' knowledge of human–animal relations in social work practice. Interest in the human–animal bond and social

work practice in Aotearoa NZ has been gaining momentum in recent years (e.g., Adamson & Darroch, 2016; Darroch & Adamson, 2016; Evans & Gray, 2012; Evans & Perez-y-Perez, 2013; Walker, Aimers, & Perry, 2015, Walker & Tumilty, 2019). The Aotearoa New Zealand *Social Work Code of Ethics* has also included a statement to recognise “the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected” (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). Despite the importance of the bond between animals and humans being discussed in Aotearoa NZ based literature, there remains a paucity of empirical evidence on social workers’ views on the inclusion of animals in their practice. Gaining an understanding of social workers’ knowledge in the area of human and companion animal relationships and examining the barriers to inclusion of animals in social work practice can contribute to a better understanding of the potential benefits to social work practice and policy development.

Based on these aforementioned findings, particularly the research conducted in the USA (Risley-Curtiss, 2010) and Canada (Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013), the overall purpose of this study was to examine the views and knowledge of social workers in relation to the HAB in Aotearoa New Zealand. This study had three objectives: (a) to explore the extent of exposure of social workers to and knowledge of HAB in social work practice; (b) to investigate how much social workers have included companion animals in their assessment and treatment of clients; and (c) to identify the degree of professional education and/or training received by social workers to include companion or other animals in their practice.

Methods

Study population

Between late-October 2018 and mid-February 2019, an online survey with the aim of exploring social workers’ perspectives

on including animals in their practice was sent out to qualified social workers to invite them to participate. This was sent out via the Aotearoa New Zealand Association for Social Workers and other professional and community networks. A low-risk ethics notification was obtained from Massey University prior to the commencement of the research. One hundred and fifty-three responses were retrieved from the online survey portal. After data cleaning and mining, 13 responses were omitted due to significant data missing (50% or more) from the main questions and the socio-demographic information (80% or more). A total of 140 responses were retained for analysis. Given the online survey was circulated to many different groups and networks, we were unable to ascertain the actual response rate.

Measures

The measures used were primarily derived from previous research and are outlined in this section.

Exposure of animal–human relations. To ascertain the level of exposure about the human–other animal bond, respondents were asked to rate a total of 7-item, derived from Risley-Curtiss (2010), on a 3-point scale (1 = *very little/none* to 3 = *a lot*) on how much they had heard or read about human–other animal relationships. Examples of these items were “Have you heard, read, been given information on link between animal abuse and child abuse, animal abuse and domestic violence, how to help people who abuse animals?” Cronbach’s alpha was at an acceptable level at 0.78.

Social work practice and animal–human relationship. Five questions were adapted from previous research (Risley-Curtiss et al., 2013; Risley-Curtiss, Zilney, & Hornung, 2010) to ask if social workers had come across animal abuse issues in their practice during the past five years using a 3-point scale (1 = *very little/none* to 3 = *a lot*). An example of the question was “Have you

encountered clients who reported safety-related concerns for animals in their own homes in the past five years?" Cronbach's alpha was reported at 0.61. Participants were also asked to rate two statements regarding their views on the benefits of animal-human relationships in social work practice "inclusion of animal in practice is a beneficial adjunct to my social work practice" and "participation in human therapeutic interventions is beneficial to animal wellbeing", using a 5-point Likert scale from 1 = *strongly disagree* to 5 = *strongly agree*.

Education and training. This section included questions adapted from Risley-Curtiss (2010) and Schlote (2002). Respondents were asked whether they have received any training in including animals in social work practice (formal or informal) (yes/no); in what areas the animals were involved; reasons that would prevent them from using animals in their practice; how many years of experience in using animals in their social work practice; where the context in which animals were used in practice was; who the clients were; what service areas were the animals involved with clients; what kind of animals were used and whether they have been tested or certified. A text box was available to provide written responses regarding the type of animals used in practice.

Organisation commitment. Respondents were asked eight questions regarding the role of their organisation in relation to the use of animals in service provision. These questions were developed based on reviewing existing literature (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Risley-Curtiss et al., 2010; Schlote, 2002; Trembath, 2014).

Socio-demographics. Participants reported their age, gender, education levels in social work, ethnicity, years of practice experience, main area of social work practice, current employment, professional affiliations and ethnicity.

Open-ended comments. The final question in the survey was an open-ended question

which screened for any additional comments.

Statistical analyses

The IBM SPSS Statistical package (version 25, IBM SPSS Statistics for Windows) was used for data entry and analysis. Descriptive statistics, mainly through frequencies, was used to describe the results derived from the data. Open-ended responses were gathered to provide a context for quantitative data, and thus were not analysed using a qualitative research approach. Illustrative quotes were selected to highlight certain common and otherwise noteworthy concepts, paraphrasing is indicated by square brackets.

Results

Social workers who participated in this research were older, with 57.9% ($n = 81$) reported to be aged 50 and over and most of them were female (93.6%, $n = 131$). The age group and high percentage of female participants also mirrored the aging workforce and a "female-dominated profession" found in other social work studies (Lewis, 2018; Yeung, Mooney, English, & O'Donohue, 2020). Most of the respondents identified themselves as New Zealand European/Pākehā (75.0%, $n = 105$). Over 50% ($n = 75$) of the participants had a social work qualification at Bachelor's level and 19.3% ($n = 27$) had a Master's level qualification. Around 43% ($n = 60$) of the participants had 16 or more years of social work practice experience and 22.9% ($n = 32$) had five years or less of practice experience. The main area of social work practice reported was in children and family (51.4%, $n = 72$), followed by adults (19.3%, $n = 27$). Half of the participants ($n = 70$) indicated their current employment was in statutory while 37.9% ($n = 53$) was in non-government organisations. As to professional affiliation, 65.7% ($n = 92$) reported to have dual affiliations with ANZASW and SWRB (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-demographic Descriptions of Study Participants

Items	Number	%
Age groups		
29 or less	11	7.9
30-39	21	15.0
40-49	27	19.3
50-59	43	30.7
60-69	34	24.3
70 and over	4	2.9
Gender		
Male	9	6.4
Female	131	93.6
Ethnicity		
NZ European/Pakeha	105	75.0
Maori	15	10.7
Pacific nations	3	2.1
Indian	2	1.4
African	1	0.7
Chinese	1	0.7
Korean	0	0.0
Other	14	10.0
Social work qualification		
Diploma level	21	15.0
Bachelor level	75	53.6
Entry Master level	27	19.3
Other	17	12.1
Years of social work practice experience		
0-5 years	32	22.9
6-10 years	18	12.9
11-15 years	29	20.7
16-20 years	22	15.7
20+ years	38	27.1
Current main practice area		
Children and family	72	51.4
Adults	27	19.3
Older people	14	10.0
Other	9	6.4
Current employment		
NGO	53	37.9
Statutory	70	50.0
Volunteer	4	2.9
Self-employed	8	5.7
Other	4	2.9
Professional affiliation		
Single affiliation (either ANZASW or SWRB)	43	30.0
Dual affiliations (both ANZASW and SWRB)	92	65.7

Exposure to information on animal–human relations

Participants were asked how much they had heard, read or been given information about the human and animal bond. The majority of the participants responded that they had read or read some/a lot about the positive influence of companion and other animals on humans (97.9%, $n = 137$), followed by a link between animal abuse and child abuse (92.9%, $n = 130$), a link between animal abuse and domestic violence (92.1%, $n = 129$), how to help people who have experienced pet loss (70.0%, $n = 98$), inclusion of animals in assessment and intervention (60.0%, $n = 84$), social workers who include animals in their practice (42.2%, $n = 59$), and how to help people who abuse animals (30.7%, $n = 43$) (see Table 2).

Extent of animal-human relationship in social work practice

Nearly 51% ($n = 71$) of the participants reported that they had come across animal abuse issues in their practice during the past five years. Out of the 71 participants who had encountered animal abuse, 74.6% ($n = 51$) indicated some/a lot in relation to becoming aware of animal abuse as a rising concern in their practice with clients, followed by 64.8% ($n = 46$) who had worked with clients who reported safety-related concerns for animals in their own homes, having worked with perpetrators of animal abuse and with one child (49.3%, $n = 35$) or an adolescent client who reported abusing an animal (49.3%, $n = 35$), and worked with one adult client who reported abusing an animal (29.6%). In addition, they were asked whether there would be any benefits of animal–human relationships in social work practice. Of the 140 participants, 94.3% ($n = 132$) of them agreed/strongly agreed that inclusion of animal in practice such as animal-assisted intervention would benefit their social work practice, followed by 90% ($n = 126$) reporting that they agree/strongly agree that participation in human therapeutic interventions would be beneficial to

animal wellbeing (see Table 2). Over 90% of the final comments provided by participants expressed strong interest in learning more about how to include animals in social work practice or to have this service available to clients even if it was not provided by themselves. These are demonstrated by the following selected quotes from different participants:

“I am looking into post-graduate veterinary social work study and would like to see the field being introduced in NZ. This is an exciting area of growth for New Zealand social work practice.”

“It is a whole new area of concern for social workers that I have only in the last year to become aware of. But nonetheless crucial to develop and be able to access some training.”

“These questions [asked in the survey] have prompted me to have discussions [with my colleagues] about abuse of animals in our assessments and interventions.”

“I think this area is like a gold mine that no one has really clicked [into]. I desperately want to bring animals into my social work practice; however, I don't know where/how to get training or training for my animals. I feel that so many people do not understand the value of animals in practice!! I would love to be an animal practitioner and would advocate for it every day!!”

“I am not interested in taking animals to my clients; however, I would definitely use a service that use animals for therapeutic purposes. Human can benefit greatly from the devotion and trust of animals in their lives.”

Education and training

Out of the 140 participants, 67.9% ($n = 95$) reported to have included animals in their social work practice. However, many of

the participants (87.9%, $n = 123$) reported that they did not have any training (formal or informal) related to including animals in their practice and within this group 64.2% ($n = 79$) had included animals in their social work practice. In fact, one participant expressed a different view about having a specific qualification to practice in this area:

“I don’t think a person needs to be certified. This is an emotional area ... it is more important the therapist has a strong recognition of the role of animals in our world and have a strong personal experience of the value of across species relationships.”

Of the 79 participants who reported having no training but included animals in their practice, 51.9% ($n = 41$) reported to have included animals as part of their interventions, followed by 40.5% ($n = 32$) who included animals as part of their assessment, 20.3% ($n = 16$) who included animals in treating clients for companion animal loss and grief and 3.8% ($n = 3$) included animals in treating clients for animal abuse.

When asked what reasons would prevent including animals in their practice, the top four reasons reported by all participants included: no clear guidelines in agency policy of allowing (or not) animals in practice (45.7%, $n = 64$), lack of training from my social work degree or continuing professional development (37.9%, $n = 53$), not being encouraged by supervisors/management team (35.0%, $n = 49$), and lack of standards of practice and ethical guidelines using animals in practice (33.6%, $n = 47$) (see Table 3). Lacking clarity from agency guidelines and limited training from their social work degree and professional development were also the top barriers reported in Hanrahan’s (2013) survey. It was also interesting to see some specific comments in the final comment box from participants that highlighted the gaps or challenges in including animals in a statutory social work context:

Table 2. *Animal–human Relations (AHRs) and Social Work Practice*

Items	Number (%)	
	Very little/None	Some & A lot
Exposure to information on AHRs		
Positive influence of companion and other animals on humans	1 (0.7)	137 (97.9)
Link between animal abuse and child abuse	9 (6.4)	130 (92.9)
Link between animal abuse and domestic violence	10 (7.1)	129 (92.1)
How to help people who have experienced pet loss	38 (27.1)	98 (70.0)
Inclusion of animals in assessment and intervention	55 (39.3)	84 (60.0)
Social workers who include animals in their practice	78 (55.7)	59 (42.2)
How to help people who abuse animals	95 (67.9)	43 (30.7)
Extent of AHRs in social work practice	Yes	No
Have come across animal abuse in their practice the last five years	71 (50.7)	62 (44.3)
Answered “yes” to encounter animal abuse ($n=71$)	Very little/None	Some & A lot
Become aware of animal abuse as a rising concern in your practice with clients	20 (14.3)	51 (71.8)
Worked with clients who reported safety-related concerns for animals in their own homes	19 (26.8)	46 (64.8)
Worked with perpetrators of animal abuse	30 (42.3)	35 (49.3)
Worked with one child or adolescent client who reported abusing an animal	29 (40.8)	35 (49.3)
Worked with one adult client who reported abusing an animal	42 (59.2)	21 (29.6)
Benefits of AHRs in social work practice	Disagree & Strongly Disagree	Agree & Strongly Agree
Inclusion of animals in practice is a beneficial adjunct to my social work practice	7 (5.0)	132 (94.3)
Participation in human therapeutic interventions is beneficial to animal wellbeing	12 (8.5)	126 (90.0)

“I think [including animals in practice] is a great idea. Unfortunately, in a statutory environment it often would not be the focus, but I can see the benefit of it for

Table 3. Education and Training in AHRs

Items	Number (%)	
	Yes	No
Inclusion of animals in practice	95 (67.9)	45 (32.1)
Training		
Receive any training (formal or informal) related to including animals in practice	15 (10.7)	123 (87.9)
No training but include animals in their practice (N=123)	79 (64.2)	44 (35.8)
Inclusion of animals (no training received) in which areas (n = 79)		
Part of interventions	41 (51.9)	38 (48.1)
Part of assessment	32 (40.5)	47 (59.5)
Treating clients for companion animals' loss and grief	16 (20.3)	63 (79.7)
Treating clients for animal abuse	3 (3.8)	76 (96.2)
Reasons preventing them to include animals in practice*		
No clear guidelines in agency policy of allowing (or not) animals in practice	64 (45.7)	75 (53.6)
Lack of training from my social work degree or continuing professional development	53 (37.9)	86 (61.4)
Not being encouraged by supervisors/management team	49 (35.0)	90 (64.3)
Lack of standards of practice and ethical guidelines using animals in practice	47 (33.6)	92 (65.7)
Have not thought of doing so	25 (17.9)	115 (82.1)
Fear of liability (animal hurting a client or clients' fear)	19 (13.6)	120 (85.7)
Against agency policy	15 (10.7)	124 (88.6)
Clients allergies	8 (5.7)	130 (92.9)
Fearful to animals myself	5 (3.6)	133 (95.0)
Do not see the value of using animals in my practice	4 (2.9)	135 (96.4)

***Multiple answers allowed**

long term intervention with children/ young person in care."

"I am very interested in statutory social work to ensure there are robust and clear processes in place to always have animals

interlinked to assessment, investigation and intervention."

"I would like to see more training for statutory social workers to recognise signs of animal violence/cruelty and its links to child abuse/family violence. I would like to see animal welfare factor into the practice framework for Oranga Tamariki social workers."

Table 4 provides information on the context of where and how animal-human relationships (AHRs) have taken place for 95 participants who reported to have used animals in their social work practice. Just over 40% ($n = 39$) indicated that they had five years or less of experience in using animals in their social work practice. The main practice context where animals were used was at an agency or organisation (28.4%, $n = 27$), followed by private practice or self-employment (12.6%, $n = 12$). Participants typically used animals in social work practice for children (aged 0-12 years) (35.8%, $n = 34$), followed by adolescents (aged 13-19 years) (32.6%, $n = 31$), and adults (25.3%, $n = 24$). Mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety) was the main service area where animals were used in therapeutic practice (53.7%, $n = 51$), followed by grief and loss (45.3%, $n = 43$) and trauma (43.2%, $n = 41$). A total of 24% ($n = 23$) reported to have used their own animals in their practice and, among them, only nine (39.1%) have had their animals tested or trained for therapeutic work. Dogs (67.4%, $n = 64$) were reported to be the most common species of animal used when providing therapies to clients. Quite a few participants provided reasons for why they included untested or untrained animals in their practice, which mainly derived from their own personal perceptions and subjective assessment on their own animal's temperament:

"I had a small dog that would read people's stress and in doing so would quietly move to be next to them for comfort."

"I have used two of my own dogs, both of whom have been brought up in an

office setting with lots of interaction with a wide range of people.”

“My dog is naturally attuned to children and with parental consent has helped a child who was fearful of dogs.”

“[My] own pet that I take to rest home to visit my own family member and then it morphed into therapy with other residents as they asked to see/pat my dog. My dog is used to be around older people. She is small and non-threatening which I think is why the residents asked me to work with them.”

“The animals I have used with clients are chosen for their calm but fun nature and ability to sit quietly with the client.”

Commitment from organisations

Among the 140 participants, the vast majority indicated that their current organisation did not provide training that included skills for workers to recognise and assess for animal abuse (90.7%, $n = 127$), followed by assessing the types of relationships that families and/or households have with their animals (80.0%, $n = 112$) and whether the families and/or households have animals (67.9%, $n = 67.9$). Even when professional development and training were available from the organisations, over 90% ($n = 131$) of the participants reported that the training was not about the benefits of using animals in practice. Around 70% responded that their current organisation did not include animal abuse in safety assessment and risk assessment protocols ($n = 106$) and service provision to clients ($n = 102$). Less than 40% ($n = 53$) of the responses indicated there were policies or training to interagency sharing or collaboration of animal abuse and human violence. Only half of the responses ($n = 70$) indicated that their current organisation would encourage them to document and take action when/if animal abuse was identified in their social work practice (see Table 5). These results are similar to the ones reported in

Table 4. Context of Where and How AHRs Take Place ($n = 95$)

Items	Number (%)	
	Yes	No
Practice contexts where animals were used		
At an agency/organisation	27 (28.4)	68 (71.6)
In private practice/self-employed	12 (12.6)	83 (87.4)
At a residential treatment centre (e.g., nursing homes)	11 (11.6)	84 (88.4)
In a hospital	9 (9.5)	86 (90.5)
In a school	7 (7.4)	88 (92.6)
Client groups		
Children (aged 0-12 years)	34 (35.8)	61 (64.2)
Adolescents (aged 13-19 years)	31 (32.6)	64 (67.4)
Adults	24 (25.3)	71 (74.7)
Young adults (aged 20-25 years)	11 (11.6)	84 (88.4)
Older adults	17 (17.9)	78 (82.1)
Couples/families	9 (9.5)	86 (90.5)
Service areas where animals were used		
Mental health (e.g., depression, anxiety)	51 (53.7)	44 (46.3)
Grief and loss	43 (45.3)	52 (54.7)
Trauma	41 (43.2)	54 (56.8)
Personal growth and self-awareness	27 (28.4)	68 (71.6)
Self-regulation	27 (28.4)	68 (71.6)
Interpersonal relationships	27 (28.4)	68 (71.6)
Group development and team building	6 (6.3)	89 (93.7)
Use your own animals in your practice?	23 (24.2)	72 (75.8)
If yes, have your animals been tested or trained? ($n=23$)	9 (39.1)	14 (60.8)
Species of animal used in therapy		
Dogs	64 (67.4)	31 (32.6)
Cats	22 (23.2)	73 (76.8)
Horses	21 (22.1)	74 (77.9)
Farm animals	5 (5.3)	90 (94.7)
Domesticated birds	4 (4.2)	91 (95.8)
Rabbits	3 (3.2)	92 (96.8)

the USA (Risley-Curtiss, 2010) and Canada (Hanrahan, 2013). Many of the participants indicated that they would want to see more support and training provided to include animals in social work practice:

“Can we have more PD [professional development] to help us begin using this therapy in our practice please?”

Table 5. Commitment from Organisations

Items	Number (%)	
	Yes	No
Does your organisation provide training to ask the followings in your social work practice?		
Ways for workers to recognise and assess for animal abuse	12 (8.6)	127 (90.7)
Assessing for the types of relationships that families and/or households have with their animals	27 (19.3)	112 (80.0)
Whether the families and/or households have animals	44 (31.4)	95 (67.9)
Does your organisation provide the following trainings?		
Training related to the benefits of including animals, such as AAI, in practice	9 (6.4)	131 (93.6)
Include animal abuse in safety assessment and risk assessment protocols	34 (24.3)	106 (75.7)
Inclusion of animals, such as animal-assisted intervention (AAI), in services provide to your clients	38 (27.1)	102 (72.8)
Policies or training related to interagency sharing or collaboration of animal and child/domestic/family/elder abuse	53 (37.9)	86 (61.4)
Encourage you to document and take action when/if animal abuse is identified	70 (50.0)	70 (50.0)

"I have not formally used animals in my practice, but I have worked with people who have service dogs. If I had the opportunity, I would most definitely use animals in my work more often, but it is not encouraged except under very special circumstances."

"I would love the opportunity to train in this area as I am very committed to animals in therapy and healing. I believe the link between animal abuse and family harm is a very strong link that cannot be denied."

Interestingly, only one participant wrote about the importance of embedding animal welfare in using animals in social work practice: "overall to me animals are the same

as humans and deserve the same right[s]. If we do not do that, then there is a problem."

Discussion

This study investigated the knowledge, experiences and perceptions of social workers in relation to including animals in their practice. To our knowledge, this is the first study conducted in Aotearoa New Zealand regarding social workers' views in the area of HAB, its potential contribution and implementation in social work practice and the challenges faced by practitioners. The current results provide a preliminary profile of what social work participants know about how social work issues are informed by HAB, and how such understandings are operationalised in practice. The first key finding of this study indicated that most of the participants have been exposed to fairly high level of information on AHRs, particularly in relation to the positive influence of animals on humans and the links between animal abuse and child abuse/domestic violence. However, being exposed to HAB does not necessarily translate into actual practice or being able to practise competently. The current study's rates of exposure to information on animals and AHRs are similar to the USA (Risley-Curtiss, 2010) and Canadian (Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013) studies, but our cohort scored lower in exposure to hearing about including animals in social work practice and how to help people who abuse animals. While more than 90% of the participants reported that the inclusion of animals in practice was beneficial to social work practice, only a small number have received either formal or informal training. Such results align with Risley-Curtiss's (2010) findings that, of those who included animals in their practice, a significant number were practising without relevant training and education. Even if they claimed to use animals in their practice, many of them in the current study (between 48 and 60%) did not include animals as part of their interventions and assessment, and showed discrepancies in practice, consistent with previous research outcomes (Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, 2010).

Participants in this study reported a high level of exposure on how to help people who have experienced pet loss but, interestingly, only 20% of social workers have included animals in treating clients for pet loss and grief which was different to previous research findings of 57.7% (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Risley-Curtiss argued that social workers in her study may prefer the treatment of loss and grief due to its more ubiquitous nature and requires less specialised aspects of treatment than abuse occurring in HAB. The low uptake by social work participants in the current study in involving animals to treat clients for pet loss and grief could be impacted upon by the limited inquiries about pets when gathering family / personal background information. Donohue (2005) recommended that social workers should include a few standard questions in assessments including whether a person owns a pet, how the pet is integrated into the daily life of the individual or family, and if there have been any recent pet losses, in order to provide appropriate interventions.

The second key finding highlighted the importance of having competence in AAI/AAT. Participants' limited integration of animals as part of interventions and assessment, and the low involvement in treating clients for animal abuse (3%) in social work practice are likely to be related to the lack of qualification in this field, lack of education and training from social work courses, professional development and organisational support (Hanrahan, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Wenocur, Cabral, & Karlovits, 2018). Social workers are ethically bound to "exercise due care for the interests and safety of those for whom we have professional responsibility, by limiting professional practice to areas of demonstrated competence" (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). This should also apply to relationships with non-human animals. The importance of recognising the role of animals in social work practice and our obligations to protect them can be seen in the 2019 *Social Work Code of Ethics* in ANZASW, which provides a formal acknowledgement of animals by the social work profession. Given the rising

popularity of the benefits of AAI/AAT and pet ownership, social workers will inevitably become more involved in non-human-animal interactions. This was further explained by Fine's (2015) argument that, when social workers involve non-human animals in their work, they should be subject to the ethical and moral responsibilities of understanding the important mechanisms of the inclusion of animals in practice and ensure safety for both the client and animal. Our study provided an interesting but also concerning phenomenon of competence in AAI/AAT. Out of the 95 participants who reported that they have included animals in their practice, 23 of them reported using their animals but only nine of them indicated that they have had their animals tested or trained. Chandler (2005) argued that therapy animals, even if they belong to the therapists themselves, play a different role in an unfamiliar environment, such as school, nursing homes or hospital, and they may be required to interact with clients or people they do not know on physical and emotional levels. Research has strongly suggested that professionals need to have competence in including animals in practice as it is their duty of competence to determine the appropriate role for their animals to work with potential clients (Howie, 2015; VanFleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017). As social work aims to be a justice-oriented profession, it is also important for social workers to promote sensitivity to, and knowledge about, social and cultural diversity. Wenocur et al. (2018) have claimed that social workers should not presume or pressure clients to conform to their own conceptualisation of HAB. Individual and cultural differences may dictate how clients respond to the suggestion of using animals in therapeutic contexts or how they view the purpose of their own animals/pets in their daily living situations (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Wolf, 2006). Not all clients will have pets or want to participate in AAI/AAT. In fact, some may have allergies or fear of the animals for personal, social and/or cultural reasons. Social workers are encouraged to maintain openness to diverse social and cultural perceptions of using animals

for assessment and intervention and find opportunities to engage in open discussion with clients (Hyers, 2015).

The lack of competence in implementing AAI/AAT and the inclusion of animals in social work has been criticised by social work scholars for disregarding human–companion-animal relationships to enhance our best ability to help our clients (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Taylor et al., 2016; Walker et al., 2015). The current research provides an indicative trend that there is a push to challenge anthropocentrism (privileging of human interests over animals), which can be seen from the respondents' motivations to include animals in practice and a willingness to pursue this. However, it is important to emphasise that more work is still needed to close the gap between people being interested to learn more and putting knowledge into practice ethically and competently. Within Western culture, consideration of the interests of animals may have become more prevalent but ultimately animals are still considered inferior to humans (Garner, 2003). An anti-oppressive approach has been suggested as a useful lens to examine how the involvement of animals in social work practice can be considered in a just way (Legge & Robinson, 2017) as the integration of animals can continue to benefit the many fields of practice where social work has already played a significant role in addressing marginalisation and inequality. This can be seen in addressing sexism and oppression (Adam & Donovan, 1995) and, as Fraser and Taylor (2016) have argued, the notion of intersectionality must include human–animal interactions to address the unequal distribution of power that further oppress both animals and women.

Aside from identifying animal abuse as an important risk factor of harm and risk to humans, further focus on the animals themselves as victims is vital in challenging the traditional status quo (Solot, 1997). By addressing animal and domestic/family violence together, there is a potential to find new ways to challenge other, related, forms

of oppression and move closer towards social justice for animals and humans (Potts, 2010). To achieve this, examining organisational policies to create spaces in which humans and other animals can work together is a crucial step. Despite the growing literature and research evidence to report the link between animal abuse, domestic/family violence and child cruelty over the past two decades, it is discouraging to note the high percentage of participants reporting the lack of policies, guidelines and training provided by organisations in AAI/AAT, including animal abuse in assessment, and cross-report/interagency collaboration. These findings raise intriguing questions regarding whether those participants who did report having experiences in dealing with animal abuse and family violence were by chance rather than through formal intake or assessment protocols. Research has indicated that people who experienced family or animal violence were more likely to be exposed to at least one additional type of abuse (DeGue & DiLillo, 2009). Therefore, the process of cross-reporting may help to identify an initial reliable red flag for the presence of child maltreatment, domestic violence and animal abuse. The low level of training or policies relating to cross-reporting or interagency sharing reported in the current study is probably attributed to the limited resources available to social welfare agencies and a lack of legislation. Currently in Aotearoa New Zealand, there is a memorandum of understanding (MOU) between SPCA New Zealand and the Ministry for Children, Oranga Tamariki, to encourage cross-reporting of child and animal abuse between agencies, but it is not mandated (SPCA, n.d.).

Risley-Curtiss et al. (2010) identified similar issues in their study of the limited integration of questions about animal abuse in assessment protocols for child protective services. They argued that most assessment protocols used standardised instruments which tended to be developed by outside agencies or personnel who may not have the necessary knowledge in this field and where

these instruments were too difficult and costly to change once they were developed. Social service organisations need to consider the importance of the relationships that people have with their companion/pet animals when accessing services, particularly for those involved with housing or family violence in which not only people experience oppression and marginalisation but also the welfare and safety of animals is involved (Legge, 2016). The lack of policy and practice was highlighted in the research conducted in 2011 by SPCA New Zealand in Aotearoa New Zealand, which identified that women wanted to take their animals with them during violent relationships but faced several structural barriers. These included a lack of support agencies, such as refuge, and crisis/rental accommodation, that allowed animals (Roguski, 2012). The debate about including animals in practice by social work practitioners has received substantial attention since the work published by Risley-Curtiss in 2010 and 10 years later, perceptions and knowledge of its importance and applications remain a challenging area to develop. Consequently, the findings of the current research further highlight a growing obligation for social work educators and researchers to engage in more critical discussion around the consideration of how our professional discipline responds to non-human animals encountered during the course of practice.

In recent times, more skills emphasis has been given to the need to ensure that animal welfare, rights and wellbeing are protected and their connections with, or benefits to, human beings is understood (Taylor et al., 2016; Walker & Tumilty, 2019). In fact, concerns about animal welfare are not exclusive in the therapeutic context but also in research. A study by Ng and colleagues (2018) reported that AAI/AAT publications seldom report how animals were used or the possible adverse outcomes for the animals, along with limited discussion on training, certification and veterinary care of the animals involved. While extended guidelines on how to treat therapy animals have been

published by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organisations (IAHAIO) (Glenk, 2017), precise criteria to ensure welfare among therapy animals are still missing due to the diverse spectrum of types of AAI/AAT; hence, establishing a set of universal guidelines remains underdeveloped (Ng, Albright, Fine, & Peralta, 2015). Although social workers in the current study may be enthusiastic and feel ready to include animals in their practice, without proper qualifications in this field and accompanied by uncertified and unqualified animals, could lead to detrimental effects on the welfare of both clients and animals. Existing research has reported that, even for certified animal handlers, the familiarity with dogs' behavioural cues such as spotting signs of discomfort varied substantially between them (Hatch, 2007). This means, even if professionals like social workers have acquired the appropriate qualifications to implement AAI/AAT, they must be aware of their animal's temperament and the settings in which the animal might best meet the needs of clients (Adamson & Darroch, 2016; Wenocur et al., 2018). Lack of knowledge and uncritical anthropomorphism to detect an animal's feelings and personality, particularly when they are anxious and stressed, can cause serious harm to people (McBride & Montgomery, 2018). Therefore, it is central for social workers to reflect on their positions in relation to offering AAI/AAT. If they present themselves or claim to be specialists with an expertise to include animals in social work practice, they should legally be held to the standards of a social worker specialising in this area of practice (Wenocur et al., 2018).

Conclusion

There are several limitations in this study to consider when interpreting the results of these findings. First, this was a cross-sectional study and its results cannot be generalised to other social workers. Given the surveys were circulated to social workers from different professional networks, it was impossible to estimate the exact response

rate. The focus of this research included social workers who have had experience working with family/whānau and animals and were interested in the area of HAB or included animals in social work practice. This may have excluded social workers from other fields of practice who have used animals in their social work practice or those that are unfamiliar in this area of work but who could see the potential benefits for their clients to contribute further to this topic. In addition, the rate of familiarity with HAB reported may have been positive skewed by social work participants answering the survey due to their own interest. Future research should focus on a national study to canvass Aotearoa New Zealand social workers' views on HAB and including animals in social work practice. Secondly, although the study did not set out to look at ethnic diversity among social workers in relation to HAB, only 11% of the participants identified as Māori. As professionals in a discipline that recognises Te Tiriti o Waitangi as the basis of our governance (ANZASW, 2019), understanding the concept of kinship between human and other animals in indigenous cultures can enrich social workers' interactions with the people who use their services. Legge and Robinson (2017) argued that social work cannot overlook the impact of colonisation and its ongoing impact for indigenous communities and the use of animals in their traditional practice and the significance of this. If social workers are to support Indigenous peoples to enhance their own wellbeing, we must understand how that wellbeing is intimately connected with humans, animals and the natural world within the context of physical and spiritual dimensions (Watene, 2016).

Overall, the findings of the current study are quite similar to those of the USA (Risley-Curtiss, 2010) and Canadian (Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013) surveys. Despite some notable contributions of the importance of HAB articulated in social work literature in the past decade, the current results continue to illustrate the lack of integration of animals in social work practice from social

workers themselves and also organisational support and guidance, which reflects the concern raised by Ryan (2011) that social work practice seems to assume human distinctiveness from other animals. This study also reveals the lack of training and competence among social workers in HAB and the use of untrained and uncertified animals to provide interventions or to be included when working with clients. As articulated by Taylor and colleagues (2016), future social work does not need to exclude animals or be anthropocentric, but to integrate them into practice that can be beneficial to clients with diverse backgrounds, as well as to social workers themselves (Evans & Gray, 2012).

Not all clients want to participate in HAB or consider it as an appropriate intervention or support for them, just as not every social worker would want to include animals in their practice. However, if social work is grounded in the core values of "meeting individual, group, national and international changing needs and aspirations; and the achievement of social justice for all" (ANZASW, 2019, p. 9), social workers need to have a responsibility to honour the non-human animal relationships in an ethically informed manner, rather than these being based on individual curiosity and interests.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

Ethics approval

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