

For the future of all life, the Code of Ethics is the key

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This viewpoint piece is a convergence of our collective response to what we consider as insincere rhetoric emanating from a great many sources whenever agriculture, climate change, animal rights, sentience and the survival of humanity are mentioned. Staring through the lens of the ANZASW *Code of Ethics*, it is our opinion that the pou / values of the association's code of ethics, starting with the ethical principle discussing the respect for the sentience of animals while in social work practice settings, are starting to lack contemporary relevance when one is discussing the aforementioned notions. We go further and suggest that social justice for all, animal rights, the natural environment, climate change, and humanities permanency have intersected and are now a united single strand and that social work, through its own code of ethics, may be a leading force to achieve positive outcomes on all interconnected pathways.

ANZASW code of ethics

Ethics are the “principles of conduct governing an individual or a group” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.a). The ANZASW states that its own code of ethics represents social work's professional identity, collective aspirations “and is a key point of reference for informing” (ANZASW, 2019) professional decision making. For us, as authors, our ethical foundations are quite like both definitions insofar as we see them as a set of rules and frameworks by which we conduct our lives and how we view and treat others. It seems to us that a code of ethics is a rule book by which the group, the collective or the individual works within when conducting themselves on a day-to-day basis. If in doubt, the code of ethics will shine the right path.

We would like to focus, initially, on the ethical principle in the ANZASW *Code of Ethics* that started this thought process. Under the pou / value of Manaakitanga is the overarching principle that states “social workers recognise and support the mana of others. We act towards others with respect, kindness and compassion. We practice empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations” (ANZASW, 2019).

Under this there is a set of 10 ethical principles; however, for us, one stands out above all the rest. It simply states that social workers “recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected” (ANZASW, 2019). This got us wondering whether this should only be bracketed within the framework of social work practice or whether, considering the climate crisis, there should be a larger remit associated with it.

But first, let us establish what is meant by *sentience* and what it is to be a sentient being. Sentience is to have “feeling or sensation as distinguished from perception and thought” (Merriam-Webster, n.d.b). To be a sentient being, in this ethical instance, an animal such as a cow, horse, cat, sheep or dog for example, is to “have emotions, feelings, perceptions, and experiences that matter to them. These can be negative (such as pain or boredom) as well as positive (such as pleasure or comfort)” (National Animal Welfare Advisory Committee [NAWAC], n.d.), or, as Jones suggests, “to be sentient is to be the subject of experience; to possess the capacity for joy, pleasure, pain, and suffering, capacities that make a moral difference” (Jones, 2015, p. 467).

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Human beings are also sentient and are, therefore, afflicted with the same feelings and emotions that non-human beings feel. It is important to note here that, while we may be different at a species level, we are like other species when we are discussing emotions and feelings. We *all* feel pain, boredom, pleasure and comfort—taking just those four very basic points stated above. Both the overarching principle and the proceeding ethical point evoked a question in us.

Why is it that we only recognise the sentience of animals when working with them? Let us take a minute to think this through.

By framing it only in a social work practice setting, it seems the association is either dismissing the capacity of other sentient beings from feeling pain, pleasure, fear and other emotions outside of this strict framework or it is suggesting to social workers that it is ethically okay to dismiss and disregard all these very complex emotions altogether when they are interacting with non-human beings outside of their work settings. The latter is an anthropocentric position which considers animals worthy of attention only when in relation to human beings.

Let us pause for a minute on that last paragraph and set out a landscape to ponder: A social worker is working with a herd of horses as part of a therapeutic human/non-human setting. During this interaction they would obviously uphold the ethical principle as part and parcel of their practice. They would not only ensure that no harm comes to the horse, but also ensure that the clients would treat and respect the horses as fellow sentient beings. At the end of the session, the social worker drives past a dairy farm, racecourse, or an abattoir, entities that main and kill hundreds of thousands of sentient beings every year. In framing the ethical point in such strict terms, the Code of Ethics suggests we are asking the social worker

to work within one ethical principle in one setting and ignore our ethical responsibilities in another. It dovetails into what Ryan (2011) suggests, as Walker et al (2015, p.25) described it: “that social work invariably views the notion of respect as relating exclusively to humans so that social workers then have difficulties in grappling with how it is that we are able to speak of our responsibilities for other creatures”.

Exploring this a little further; it is widely known that sentient non-human mothers feel intense emotional pain when her child is taken from her straight after giving birth, young calves are selected to die purely because they are a “waste product” or they were born the wrong sex (Scoop, 2018) and non-human beings are forcibly impregnated against their will. Where do the notions of feminism, racism, discrimination, or body autonomy start and stop? “Feminists point out how the very same ideology that legitimates oppression based on sex and gender is the same ideology that acts to oppress animals” (Jones, 2015, p. 476). Hundreds of social workers go to work every day in Aotearoa New Zealand to fight against these and many more injustices. Is the fight against any one of these notions only for us and *not* for our fellow sentient beings who want to live as much as we do?

As it stands, we feel it promotes speciesism, creates an unneeded ethical tension, and was placed within the Code of Ethics without any real exploration as to how it fits into the realities of what it means to be a sentient non-human today and the impacts on contemporary society. However, it is not the only ethical point in the code of ethics that requires revisiting in our opinion.

Our adopted social work definition holds the principles of “social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities” (ANZASW, 2019, p. 8) as central to social work. In terms of social justice, Jones argued that “animal rights is a social justice issue and that those committed

to social justice should expand social justice praxis to include the interests of all sentient beings” (2015, p. 469). If what he says is true, and we believe it is, then the pou / values that the professional upholds and that “emanate from our National Foundation Document: Te Tiriti o Waitangi - Rangatiratanga, Manaakitanga, Whanaungatanga, Aroha, Kotahitanga, Mātātoa and Wairuatanga” (ANZASW, 2019, p. 10) develop a profounder and broader reach than they currently embrace. Extending this further, the principles that encircle empowerment, self-determination, protection from harm, collective action and wellbeing should acknowledge that other sentient beings have a right to justice, a right to determine their own future and a fundamental right to exist in a state of self-determined wellbeing.

It should be acknowledged the industries that perpetuate harm, such as the animal agricultural industry not only cause untold environmental damage which we will discuss later, but also provide

a clear case of the intersection between speciesism, racism, classism, and environmental justice. For instance, the intersection of speciesism and classism can be made visible when we recognize that the consumption of meat and the wearing of certain animal pelts (e.g., mink, ermine, etc.) are class markers. (Jones, 2015, p. 476)

Importantly, Māori, as kaitiaki of the natural world, are starting to identify those industries such as those mainstays of New Zealand’s economy are incongruent with “their strong beliefs in kaitiakitanga” (*New Zealand Herald*, 2019) and are starting to move towards more environmentally sustainable industries.

This opinion piece goes beyond the realm of working with animals in rehabilitation or therapy environments. It sees animals as our sentient equals and, as such, asks us all to re-evaluate our current interactions with our

surroundings through a broader and more ethical lens. In the current climate—no pun intended—we really need to change that for the sake of mother earth and all beings within it. We need to “talk about our location within the natural world” (Walker et al., 2015, p. 34) and how we, through our individual and collective actions, can change current practices. Our intention here is to suggest that, while our pou / values are pertinent, the professions principles that underline the pou / values and “mainstream theories of justice are impoverished because they ignore nonhuman animals” (Jones, 2015, p. 468).

We will leave the final word on this section to (Ryan, 2011, 164) when he argued that:

when social workers make the moral judgment (for that is what they invariably do) that they will not speak out about animal abuse or neglect, they routinely minimise this reality, and by inference deny that animals have any meaningful moral value....Given that social work has a long and proud history of speaking out on behalf of, and of giving moral priority to the weak and vulnerable in human society, it is incumbent that social workers speak out and accord moral priority to animals, the most weak and vulnerable members in our communities.

Our pou / values of Rangatiratanga, Manaakitanga, Whanaungatanga, Aroha, Kotahitanga, Mātātoa and Wairuatanga demand nothing less.

Contemporary farming

This brings us neatly into the next point we would like to briefly expand upon within the framework of the previously mentioned ethical points.

Even as far back as 2012 it was reported that, globally, agriculture was responsible for 14% of deforestation, primarily used to grow feed for livestock, which accounted for an additional 18% of emissions (World

Future Council, 2012). Agriculture also uses as much as 70% of all water usage globally leading to greater erosion of soil and greater deforestation (MidWest Centre, 2019) and that the largest 20 livestock companies in the world produce more greenhouse gases than either Germany, Britain or France, and are receiving billions of dollars in subsidies to continue to pollute our world (*The Guardian*, 2021).

In Aotearoa New Zealand, “high emissions of methane and nitrous oxide from agriculture” (The Conversation, 2019) makes up to 48.1% of all our greenhouse gas emissions (Niwa, n.d.a) and the industry, in Aotearoa New Zealand, accounted for approximately 1 million cows killed in 2020 (Statistica, n.d.), 630,000 pigs killed in 2021 (Figure.nz, n.d.) and 120 million chickens killed in 2019 (Safe, n.d.). While these are not all the non-human species slaughtered, they are all sentient, meaning that, as well as their experiencing the aforementioned emotions, all most probably did not want to die in the manner that they did.

Let’s pause for a moment and consider what the last two paragraphs say. We have an industry that is causing untold damage to the environment through enormous deforestation, using most of the world’s water, causing soil erosion and pumping huge amounts of emissions into the air. It is causing the death of, worldwide, billions of innocent sentient non-human beings and, but not specifically mentioned earlier, it would be greatly contributing to rising sea levels that will cause the permanent displacement of entire island nations and with it the absolute destruction of entire cultures

All the points mentioned are arguably issues that would fall somewhere in the association’s Code of Ethics through commitments to such things like social justice, human rights, self-empowerment and the previously mentioned point regarding the treatment of sentient non-humans. We are hard pressed to think of another

industry that causes this much damage to contemporary society. In our opinion, it is a direct affront to all the pou / values in the Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the association’s Code of Ethics—however, the social work profession is largely silent on it.

Perhaps Garner (2013) has the answer when he argues, as summarised by Jones (2015, p.472), that if one was to “decouple social justice from the distribution of economic goods, we allow room for justice to include the distribution and assignment of other things, such as liberties, powers, opportunities, goods and bads, rights, experiences.” In other words, when we move away from economic agricultural concerns the implications and understanding of social justice for all sentient beings coupled with a healthier cleaner mother earth is more readily accepted.

Climate change

Which then brings us to our final point of contention. Climate change is arguably the biggest fight humanity has faced since we first walked this earth (United Nations, 2021) and it is entirely caused by our behaviour (Climate.gov, 2021). The effects of climate change in Aotearoa New Zealand are numerous—the erosion of coastal margins, flooding, availability of freshwater (Royal Society, n.d.), hotter temperatures causing health issues for our most vulnerable (Niwa, n.d.b), crop failure and increased droughts (Te Ara, n.d.) to name but a few. We also believe, as others do, that climate change is a social justice (Eco Watch, 2020) and human rights (Human Rights Commission, 2019) issue, core principles central to our profession, and while it is affecting all of us, it does not affect everyone equally.

ANZASW states that social work’s dual purpose is:

- To enable and empower individuals, families, groups and communities to find their own solutions to the issues and problems they face.

- To inform society at large about the injustices in its midst, and to engage in action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice (ANZASW, 2019).

If we take those statements at face value and we agree that climate change is humanity's biggest threat, then should not the profession be pulling out all stops to either stop the threat altogether or, at the very least, ameliorate the effects that climate change has on society?

What is stopping the social work profession from informing society at large about the *social and human rights* injustices in its midst, and to engage in action to change the structures of society that create and perpetuate injustice *through the collective inaction on climate change*?

Is it just too hard an issue to tackle and is the profession so engrossed in individualised human-to-human interactions that it fails to grasp the enormous task ahead? Or is it as simple as Ryan (2011, as cited in Walker et al., 2015, p. 25) argued when he observed "that our human-centred approach to social work always constructs the client as human and that human welfare is paramount above all else" and with this human centred / individual approach, the social worker fails to see beyond this framework the obvious impending calamity befalling all of us.

Interconnecting pathways

We feel all of this can be interconnected through, initially, one very simple but important ethical point in ANZASW's code. A point that, if followed through with, could ameliorate a lot of the pain and suffering laid out in the preceding pages. While we do not profess that it would "fix the world's problems", and we do not want to simplify what is a very complex issue, we feel that at least one of the major contributors to the issue could be tackled head on and not left to

continually destroy the earth and all beings on the planet.

Let us recap on what has been discussed thus far under each heading

- **Climate Change**
 - Planet Earth's biggest threat
 - Entirely caused by human processes
 - A social justice and human rights issue
 - Caused primarily from greenhouse gases
- **Agriculture**
 - Produces over a third of the world's greenhouse gases
 - In Aotearoa itself, it is closer to 50%
 - Responsible for 14% of deforestation, primarily used to grow feed for livestock, which accounted for an additional 18% of emissions
 - Uses 70% of all water usage globally
 - 20 livestock companies are responsible for more greenhouse gas emissions than either Germany, Britain or France
 - Kills billions upon billions of sentient beings
- **ANZASW Code of Ethics**
 - The association's code of ethics has, through its pou / values a blueprint for a more sustainable and ethical world; however, it lacks in its embrace of a broader and deeper view of those pou / values.
 - The core principle of social justice should encircle all living beings

Our thesis is quite straightforward and simple. If humanity were to stop the senseless slaughter of billions of sentient beings, we are sure it would immediately mitigate the effects of climate change, meet COP26 targets and ensure Earth's survival for future generations of all shapes, sizes and species. We feel social work, through the associations and Te Tiriti o Waitangi core pou / values, has been given an ethical obligation and a central platform to take this thesis forward. The profession can do this by advocating for a "just transition" from meat and dairy industries to plant-based

industries. It would be more in line with the profession's code of ethics, specifically the notions of upholding social justice for all, human rights, self-determination, respecting diversity, the protection of rights and freedoms and the recognition of sentience across all the Earth's beings, to name but a few. It would also see the profession be the first in the world to tackle the biggest contributor to the climate change crisis.

Conclusion

We hope this viewpoint article has been able to articulate our thoughts and arguments in such a way that it fosters more discussion around an area that we believe must be tackled. There is no need to slaughter our fellow sentient beings for human beings to survive, and in meeting their ethical obligations, social workers can be a leading force in this fight for earthly survival. The fate and survival of humanity depends on our understanding that there is an augmented recognition of the pou / values. Upholding rights for all is to the advantage of all. In fact, in continuing to do the same thing we did yesterday we are consigning ourselves to the inevitable end we are facing today.

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