ORIGINAL ARTICLE
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Challenging anthropocentrism and speciesism in social work education

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Socially and legally acceptable views toward other animals are changing throughout the world. However, most social work education does not reflect such changes. Non-human animals are still viewed as tools for improving the wellbeing of human animals. To promote the development of social work education and practice responsive to today's human and non-human animal relationships, this article discusses much-needed theoretical developments in social work education.

APPROACH: We examine recent changes to the Canadian Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics and Canadian Social Work Education Accreditation Standards to assess the current frameworks for its education. These have recently added a focus on Environmental Justice, Sustainability and Ecological Practices to address growing concerns about climate change, yet do not consider animals explicitly or recognise the impacts of speciesism. Achieving a collective vision of social, economic, and environmental justice for all beings cannot be realised without considering non-human animals and actively challenging anthropocentric ontologies and epistemologies.

CONCLUSIONS: We argue for a double-pronged approach addressing both ontologies and epistemologies of social work and discuss integrating key concepts from Critical Animal Studies (CAS) such as: anti-anthropocentrism, anti-speciesism, intersectionality, truncated narrative of dominance, and trans-species social justice, into social work education. By sharing authors' teaching experiences, we demonstrate how such a theoretical orientation helps to critically analyse hierarchal relationships and envision practice to dismantle oppressive social systems that intersect with human and non-human animals. Thus, such theoretical changes, with a double-pronged approach in education, can strengthen social workers' capacities to address justice.

Keywords*:* Social work education, social work and animals, Critical Animal Studies, speciesism and anthropocentrism, trans-species social justice, human–animal relations

By drawing from our teaching experiences, this article seeks to contribute to theoretical advancements in social work education responsive to today's human–non-human animal relationships. This introduction begins by outlining shifting social and legal animal–human relations relevant to this article, including Canadian social work contexts.

Globally, animals are increasingly recognised as valued family members (Charles & Davies, 2011; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023; Taylor et al., 2020). More than half of Canadian households, for example, include companion animals, which increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic (Canadian Animal Health Institute, 2022). This means social workers likely support individuals and

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families with important animal relationships (Arkow, 2020; Chalmers et al., 2020; Ferreira et al., 2018). A deeper understanding of human–non-human animal relationships is, thus, warranted to identify opportunities for social work education that considers changing realities, including those of other species.

While relationships with companion animals have risen, so has awareness of other human–non-human animal relationships, including the social impacts and welfare of farmed animals. The majority of Canadians desire higher welfare conditions for farmed animals and strong support for transparency and oversight; over five years ago, almost 100 major food companies signed commitments to change, yet "Canada is making almost no progress on eliminating cages and has fallen far behind the United States, the United Kingdom, and the European Union regarding cage-free egg production" (Mercy for Animals, 2023, p. 3).

Growing awareness of the welfare of farmed animals must be understood along with legal changes in this century. Since the early 2000s, Ag-gag laws, which limit undercover investigations of agribusiness, have resurged in the US (Ceryes & Heaney, 2019) and are steadily increasing in Australia (Whitfort, 2019) and Canada (Nickerson, 2024). Ag-gag laws significantly threaten freedom of speech, while lack of transparency in agribusiness impacts the safety of workers and the wellbeing of farmed animals. The interconnectedness between the commodification of animals and human labour rights highlights the limitations of current animal welfare approaches for legislative and policy changes to counter oppressive political, economic and legal systems that support agribusiness. Thus, recognising the legal rights of animals is critical.

Countries around the world, such as Aotearoa New Zealand, Chile, Spain, and the UK have passed legislation recognising animal sentience, acknowledging the capacity of animals to experience positive and negative emotions. These are important steps toward the legal rights of animals. Canada, however, has lagged behind in changing perspectives on the legal rights of animals (Levitt, 2024). For example, the ban on cosmetic animal testing in Canada took effect in 2023, long after more than 40 other countries enacted similar legislation (Humane Society of the United States, 2024). Recognising animals as sentient beings in Canada is limited to individual criminal cases (*R v Chen*, [2021]); this is far from the more comprehensive understanding and legislative progress needed. Importantly, animal sentience enshrined in law establishes the need to recognise the wellbeing of non-human animals outside of human needs and use (Humane Canada, 2022); however, the Jane Goodall Act, the efforts since November 2021 to amend the Criminal Code and the Wild Animal and Plant Protection and Regulation of International and Interprovincial Trade Act (great apes, elephants and certain other animals) was withdrawn from the Senate in 2024 (Parliament of Canada, 2024).

The growing evidence for the link between the anthropogenic climate crisis and mental health (Xue et al., 2024) is another context to call for changes in social work. The emergence of terms such as *climate anxiety* and *ecological grief* are rooted in the loss of imagined futures, biodiversity loss and grief over the extinction of species (Lawrance et al., 2022). Sorenson and Matsuoka (2020, p. 145) asserted that denial of animal rights (not treating non-human animals as property or resources) is significant:

> Keeping with use of animals for food alone, the scale of suffering and killing is immense: billions of land animals are killed each year. Including aquatic animals moves this into the trillions. In addition to those raised to be killed are huge numbers of pests and predators who are poisoned or shot, wildlife whose habitat is destroyed and bycatch, the incidental capture of non-target species. Raising animals for food is a major contributor to biodiversity

collapse, mass extinction, environmental degradation, pollution of air, soil and water and climate crisis, all of which have detrimental impacts on human populations.

As climate change continues to impact mental health (Xue et al., 2024), social work education needs to respond to the intertwined wellbeing of humans and non-human animals.

In addition to the above social and legal situations, we consider recent changes to the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE) Accreditation Standards as significant contexts for this article. CASWE Standards have added a focus on environmental sustainability, ecological practices and environmental justice to address growing concerns about climate change, yet animals are not explicitly named. However, achieving a collective vision of social, economic, and environmental justice for all beings cannot be realised without considering non-human animals and actively challenging anthropocentric ontologies and epistemologies. Animal–human relationships, therefore, should be included in Canadian social work education. This article argues that integrating key tenets of Critical Animal Studies (CAS) into social work curricula can help shift anthropocentric ontologies and epistemologies by providing opportunities in the classroom to analyse hierarchal relationships and reveal how speciesist relationships with non-human animals maintain such oppressive relationships within interlocking systems.

CAS is an interdisciplinary field of study that has grown since the late 20th century, with scholars and activists collaborating to liberate all animals. Best et al. (2007) developed 10 basic principles of CAS. The foundational idea of CAS rests on the fact that non-human animals are not objects that exist for humans to use as we wish but are individual beings with their own lives and interests and have inherent value. Addressing intersectionality is essential for CAS. For CAS, the scope of intersectionality goes beyond humans. It reveals interlocking power relationships built on an unsuspected ideology of speciesism and anthropocentrism. The course discussed in this article challenges students to understand intersectionality as more than a tool to describe oppressive relationships in everyday practice. This course is designed to prompt students to understand that intersectionality can function as a systemic social mechanism to maintain oppressive relationships unless we address speciesism.

This article begins with a literature review identifying relevant current knowledge, followed by a section describing Canadian social work and its context. Guided by these two sections, we share our efforts to include animals in a social work course and discuss concepts of CAS used for the course. The article concludes with discussions of critical social work with animals, including humans.

Literature review

Social workers have recognised the profound role that non-human animals play in clients' relationships throughout life stages (Bibbo et al., 2019; Chalmers et al., 2020; Hanrahan, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, 2010b; Turner, 2005). Humans benefit from the support and comfort non-human animals offer during disasters (Wu et al., 2023) and during a wide range of acute and chronic illnesses (Barker & Wolen, 2008). At the same time, the loss of such significant relationships can bring profound grief. This reality is often unspoken and overlooked despite continued calls for professionals to address such grief and bereavement in their practice (e.g., Whipple, 2021). Non-human animals' therapeutic capacity to develop positive qualities such as compassion and a sense of responsibility among children (Faver, 2010) and inmates of correction facilities (Britton & Button, 2005) has been utilised to develop innovative programmes. Although acknowledgement of the labour of animals as 'partners/workers' has increased (Coulter, 2017), their inclusion

in these contexts continues to regard them as resources for practice and disregards their rights to not being considered as property or resources.

Decades of studies addressing violence against women (VAW) and intimate partner violence (IPV) have shown that shelter workers still do not consistently ask about companion animals during intake assessments (Stevenson et al., 2018). Shelters also continue not accepting individuals with non-human animals facing VAW/IPV, even with a growing understanding of the *violence link* between humans and non-human animals (e.g., Stevenson et al., 2018). The disregard for non-human animals as sentient beings deserving of respect for their lives has resulted in the death of such animals, and children witnessing violent abuse (Volant et al., 2008), and in some situations, the death of women experiencing VAW (Montgomery et al., 2024). Similar speciesist and anthropocentric assumptions shape understanding of human–non-human animal relationships in child welfare (Campbell, 2022), aging and housing (Matsuoka et al., 2020), and disability fields (Arathoon, 2024; Sorenson & Matsuoka, 2022) in social work. These gaps lead to outcomes that ultimately harm all animals, including humans. Scholars have shown that systems grounded in such speciesist assumptions (that is, speciesism, which denotes a prejudice, negative attitudes or beliefs against those members of other species) often result in responses that fail to address the root causes of violence while reinforcing hierarchies of beings and structural oppression (Flynn, 2000; Lindsay, 2022; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023). Some studies have applied CAS's understanding of speciesism to examine how social, political and cultural systems are interconnected with non-human animals and humans (Lindsay, 2022; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023). However, perspectives like these that offer a more inclusive understanding of structural violence beyond the human species are limited.

Since the 20th century, understanding of the relationships between humans and non-human animals has been encapsulated in the concept of human–animal bonds (HAB), rooted in Bowlby's attachment theories (Sable, 2013). In the 21st century, the One Health approach has been promoted especially by the 2008 strategic framework, "One World, One Health", which aimed to control the risks of zoonotic disease (i.e., infectious diseases from animals to people) (Food and Agriculture Organization [FAO], 2008). Notably, the concept of 'One Health' has been a practical response to the global health crisis and endorsed to control mainly infections to people by major international organizations such as the FAO, UNICEF, UN System Influenza Coordination, the World Bank, WHO, and the World Organisation for Animal Health (FAO, 2008). While both approaches have gained widespread acceptance in social work, they have also been criticised for their anthropocentric perspective (Besthorn, 2011; Ferreira et al., 2024; Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023) and their limited capacity to examine power relationships and structural oppression (Baquero, 2021; Matsuoka, 2023; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023). This critique is particularly relevant as speciesism intersects with other forms of oppression, such as sexism, classism, racism, ableism, and ageism (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2018), perpetuating not only anthropocentrism but also other oppressive relationships among humans. For more than 20 years, scholars have been advocating for a shift in these anthropocentric beliefs and practices (e.g., Besthorn, 2011; Bretzlaff-Holstein, 2018; Flynn, 2000; Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013; Ryan, 2011) while highlighting a lack of analysis of speciesism in social work (e.g., Bretzlaff-Holstein, 2018; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023; Wolf, 2000), underscoring the issue's importance and urgency.

Using similar questionnaires in the United States and Canada, Risley-Curtiss (2010b), Hanrahan (2013), Ferreira et al. (2018),

and Chalmers et al. (2020) have explored social workers' knowledge, education and practice around human–non-human animal relations. Their findings show that social workers surveyed did not have appropriate training or education, and the majority were not actively including companion animals in their practice. However, most had awareness of the link between abuse of humans and abuse of animals and recognised the importance of acknowledging grief over pet loss. The reasons for not incorporating human–non-human animal relations included lack of training and knowledge; most wanted to learn more. In Ontario, Canada, social workers assumed that including animals meant micro-level practices such as animal assisted interventions based on HAB. They listed the inclusion of non-human animals as incongruent with organisations' policies and mandates (Ferreira et al., 2018), suggesting ontological and epistemological perspectives limited by anthropocentrism and speciesism, where non-human animals are viewed primarily as resources.

Efforts have been made to include human–non-human animal relationships in social work education (Bretzlaff-Holstein, 2018; Faver & Strand, 2003; Risley-Curtiss, 2010a). Contesting the anthropocentric and speciesist ethical and moral foundation of social work and proposing the inclusion of animals in its code of ethics demonstrates another transformative effort (Ryan, 2011). According to Duvnjak and Dent (2024), the codes of ethics for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia now include references to animals. These changes in codes of ethics hold the potential to move beyond anthropocentrism and speciesism as they facilitate ontological and epistemological transformation.

The existing studies indicate that our education requires shifting toward anti-speciesism and anti-anthropocentrism to support responsive practice, and the change needs a double-pronged approach, not merely adding knowledge/evidence but transforming ontology and epistemology. Below, to apply the double-pronged approach, we discuss integrating CAS into social work education by sharing authors' teaching experiences. First, we describe the background of social work education in Canada, then examine recent changes in two significant organisations for Canadian social work education.

Canadian contexts

Registered Social Workers (RSWs) are Ontario's largest regulated mental health profession providing psychotherapy and counselling (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2020). Professional social workers are guided by a *Code of Ethics* established by the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). The Ontario Association of Social Workers (OASW, 2018) reports that the top six practice fields include Adult Mental Health and Substance Abuse, Hospital Health Care, Children and Youth Mental Health, School Social Work, Primary Health Care, and Private Practice. It is estimated that of 22,000 RSWs in Ontario, 60% work in these fields, providing individuals, families, groups, and communities with mental health support across a wide range of issues (OASW, 2018). Becoming an RSW in Ontario requires completion of a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), typically a four-year undergraduate programme, or a Master of Social Work (MSW), a one or two-year graduate programme from universities accredited by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education (CASWE). It is estimated that over three-quarters (76%) of social workers in Ontario hold an MSW as their highest level of education (OASW, 2018). To maintain the status of the RSW from their regulatory college, the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers, graduates must prove ongoing education and learning. Currently, 14 accredited universities provide social work programmes in Ontario. Namely, CASWE plays a

critical role in determining the curricula of both BSW and MSW programmes, and their accreditation standards reveal the expectations of Canadian social work education concerning human–non-human animal relationships. Such expectations have significant implications for the largest regulated mental health profession in Ontario. Thus, examining both the *Code of Ethics* and the standards by CASWE is a good starting point for addressing how we can incorporate human–non-human animal relationships in Canadian social work education.

Examining Changes in the Code of Ethics and Accreditation Standards

CASW Code of Ethics

CASW is a federation of social work associations across Canada dedicated to promoting the profession, engaging in social justice advocacy, and establishing practice standards (CASW, 2024). The 2024 changes to the CASW *Code of Ethics* named animals explicitly within an environmental justice focus. However, all references to animals are overtly anthropocentric. For example, one of the guiding principles (2.4) is that "Social workers advocate for the stewardship of natural resources and the protection of the environment for the common good of all people" (CASW, 2024). It provides further context for practice, emphasising the need for social workers to "promote the protection of the environment, land, air, water, plants, and animals as essential to the well-being of all people." Additional mentions of animals include advocating for "government policy on the continuous improvement of the environment, land, air, water, plants and animals, the efficient use of natural resources and the protection of ecosystems" and "the inclusion of Indigenous laws, knowledge, practices, and ways of knowing in the protection of the land, air, water, plants, and animals." These updates focus on the wellbeing of people only (i.e., human animals). Embedded within these principles is a belief that social workers (humans) should protect the animals, particularly for their contributions to human wellbeing, not for the benefit of all beings on this planet. Such a principle perpetuates hierarchies of domination by adopting a protective stance without questioning how speciesism interlocks with other forms of oppression.

Accreditation Standards by CASWE

As highlighted above, CASWE is responsible for the accreditation of all social work programmes in Canada. This plays a crucial role in guiding the profession's future. The most recent vision, which shapes the standards, was established in 2021. We searched for mention of human–non-human animal relationships in the standards and found the following:

> CASWE-ACFTS envisions an economically, socially, and environmentally just world based on humanitarian and democratic ideals that demonstrate *respect for the worth, agency*, and *dignity of all beings* [emphases added]. Achieving such a vision calls for critical analyses of power relations, the dismantling of inequitable social structures, and solidarity with populations that experience poverty, oppression, and exploitation. (CASWE, 2024)

For the first time, CASWE highlights the need for social work to recognise the dignity, autonomy and value of *all* living beings in this vision statement. This provides a critical opportunity to reconsider social work's anthropocentric foundations; however, the envisioned ideals remain anthropocentric. Unfortunately, the methods to achieve the vision assume that solidarity and social structures concern only humans. Nevertheless, this opens up a critical space for social work educators to reimagine a vision of justice to be more inclusive of non-human beings.

Additional changes to the CASWE *Curriculum Standards* further this

perspective. The ninth objective of the new core curriculum content centres on "Environmental Sustainability and Ecological Practice." The first objective states that "Social work students shall have opportunities to a) understand the need to create ecologically sustainable communities, economies and natural and built environments, in which *all life forms and ecosystems* [emphasis added] can survive and thrive" (CASWE, 2021). Unlike the CASW's *Code of Ethics*, but like the above vision statement, CASWE uses species-inclusive language when referencing the need to work towards sustainable environments and ecosystems by including "all life forms." The word choices allow social workers and social work educators to consider futures beyond speciesism instead of limiting envisioning to a particular species, such as human beings.

The recent changes in *Accreditation Standards* and the *Code of Ethics* shed light on the evolving contexts of Canadian social work education. These changes not only indicate a shift towards a more inclusive view of non-human beings in social work but also highlight persistent anthropocentrism and speciesism. Those amendments announced by CASW in 2024, have been more explicit in including animals, although both continue to centre anthropocentrism. Significantly, the gap between the *Code of Ethics* and CASWE's curriculum standards raises concerns, as the standards may not adequately prepare students to align with the professional code of ethics. These findings indicate the urgency of addressing the field's persistent anthropocentricity and the need to broaden epistemological and ontological viewpoints that shift toward anti-anthropocentric social work education.

Opportunity for transformation: Animals in social work education

In this section, we will discuss a course on animals and social work developed based on the perspective of CAS. In particular, we focus on trans-species social justice (TSSJ), which means social justice across species and beyond the dominant species, i.e., humans (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). As Nocella et al. (2014) explained, CAS takes anti-anthropocentric and anti-speciesism ontological and epistemological stands. TSSJ interprets social justice relative to dominance and oppression that is distinct from distributive justice, necessitating a shift in one's worldview. By introducing different ontological and epistemological standpoints, the course aims to: 1) shift students' perspectives on human–non-human animal relations; 2) help them consider revising their professional ethics and ideas of social justice, and thus; 3) incorporate anti-anthropocentric and anti-speciesism into social work praxis.

Key concepts in CAS and TSSJ

The course begins by introducing different theoretical perspectives on animals and related key concepts. To understand what 'beyond humans' and 'across species' mean, as well as introduce non-human ontological and epistemological standpoints, we introduced the concepts "*subject-of-a-life*" by Regan (1983) and "*equal consideration of interests*" by Singer (1975). Regan's concept has become the basis for the animal rights movement and CAS. Subject-of-a-life means that animals have unique individual lives that matter to them and have rights not to be exploited and subjected to suffering. Regan, as a deontologist, is concerned with ideas of ethical duties. He argued that it is a matter of justice not only to treat animals "humanely" but to abolish systems in which they are considered resources for human use. Systems include physical systems, and systems of ideas and ideology. This critical approach considers broader structural issues and recognises what has been overlooked as acceptable practices or realities. Singer's utilitarian ethicist concept, "equal consideration of interests," which supports animal welfare perspectives is also included in the course. The moral principle of "equal consideration of interests" to all

animals demands that students consider moral responsibilities for non-human animals, although utilitarian ethics tips the scale toward humans. Realising non-human animals are "subject-of-a-life" like human animals, students reflect on the basis of rights for life for all animals, including humans and our ethical and liberation duties. Thus, these two concepts help students understand the limitations of animal welfare perspectives and explore possibilities for liberation-based animal rights perspectives in social work. They are useful for interrogating their professional and personal ontological and epistemological bases for the moral ideal and equality in human–non-human animal relationships.

Speciesism, coined by Ryder (2000), is another core concept introduced in the course to enhance students' ability to interrogate everyday lives and practice from different ontological and epistemological perspectives. The idea of species differentiates beings, revealing an artificial classification system that codifies hierarchical relationships. The concept of speciesism denotes a prejudice, negative attitudes or beliefs against members of other species and provides opportunities to interrogate a taken-for-granted hierarchical system of classification. Speciesist ideology operates to justify domination over other animals and our economic exploitation and commodification of them. As Sorenson (2014) argued, unsettling speciesism is almost unthinkable as it is the basis of the capitalist economy, and a tremendous material investment has been made in the institutions and practices of exploitation (e.g. agribusiness, experimentation, entertainment and leisure). Speciesism is also embedded in and reinforced by complex histories of imperialism and colonialism, exemplified by European expansion to other parts of the world, bringing various types of fauna and flora, including humans, to the west. Through learning the concept of speciesism, students realise that academics have contributed to the maintenance of this ideology by developing systems of knowledge about animals and theories to justify human domination.

The fourth foundational concept to shift ontology and epistemology is the legal conceptualisation of *animals as property* (Francione, 1995). In addition to speciesism, this lays the essential basis for a critical understanding of human–non-human animal relationships within a capitalist society's social, economic, political and legal systems. Realising animals as property is vital because it is another taken-for-granted human–non-human animal relationship that social work does not consider. It further clarifies the idea of animal rights for the course. Francione (2020, p. 30) argued, "We recognize all humans as having a basic right not to be treated as the property of others…Is there a morally sound reason not to extend this single right—the right not to be treated as property—to animals?" He asserted, in line with Regan's assertion of animal rights:

> Or to ask the question another way, why do we deem it acceptable to eat animals, hunt them, confine and display them in circuses and zoos, use them in experiments or rodeos, or otherwise treat them in ways in which we would never think it appropriate to treat any human irrespective of how "humane" we were being? (2020, p. 30)

The pursuit of animal rights means extending these legal rights to all animals. The legal understanding of animals as property justifies animal exploitation and inherent oppressive relationships between humans and non-human animals. This concept provides another tool for students to appreciate the current legal changes in many countries as described earlier. It offers an excellent opportunity to clarify the term *animal welfare*. There seems to be some misunderstanding that animal welfare is similar to social welfare for human animals. The idea of social welfare has been normalised as a part of civil society

since the 20th century as the idea of human rights is widely accepted. Social welfare is based on human rights rather than charity. However, the historical development of the idea of animal welfare is not based on animal rights. The core principles for animal welfare originated in the Five Freedoms by the UK government in 1965 to safeguard food animals from expanding industrial animal complexes (i.e., factory farms) and are used for animal care protocols. The Five Freedoms are freedoms from hunger, discomfort, pain, and fear, and to express normal behaviour (Webster, 2005). Physical pain and emotional suffering of non-human animals are acknowledged in animal welfare today and debates on what and how to address the idea of animal welfare continue (Palmer & Sandøe, 2018). In this course, the discussion on animals as property clarifies why an animal rights approach is necessary in social work rather than an animal welfare approach within capitalist societies. Such a discussion helps social workers to collaborate with animal welfare organisations, knowing the pros and cons of these approaches. Building on the core concepts described above, the course adopts Iris Marion Young's work to consider social justice in relation to dominance and oppression, not as distributive justice. Young (2011) identified oppression as having five faces: exploitation; violence; powerlessness; marginalisation; and cultural imperialism. The course approaches social justice by addressing systemic social context, which makes unjust acts (i.e., five faces of oppression) acceptable (see Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). The course takes the idea further by utilising CAS and TSSJ. It helps the students realise that systemic social contexts, i.e., institutional oppression, such as sexism, classism, racism, ableism, etc., are firmly interlocked with overlooked speciesism. Thus, when we consider intersectionality, the course encourages students to consider speciesism, which is typically omitted from observation and analysis in social work. Reasons for omission are easily understood when one realises that what is considered important knowledge and reality are human-centred; that is, anthropocentric and speciesist. Therefore, examining the foundations of social work practice becomes critical: "What is knowledge?" "How do we know what we know?" "Why are certain pieces of knowledge considered important and others are not? Who determines this?" We must also reflect on "What is reality?" and again, "Who determines this?" This helps students to realise the importance of epistemology and ontology in everyday practice. Most importantly, encouraging students to ask, "Who determines what is valued or real?" helps them realise that both epistemology and ontology concern power relationships and are essential to unveiling and explaining institutional oppressive conditions and domination.

Course materials and topics

Realising there was a lack of theoretical and empirical studies to support the development of animals and social work, the second author has secured funding and published co-edited books and co-authored articles with like-minded CAS scholars in the last ten years. In addition to significant work by others, the course utilises authors' work, especially on intersectionality with speciesism. For example, for racism (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2021), classism (Matsuoka et al., 2020), ablism (Sorenson & Matsuoka, 2022), sexism (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2023), and canid–human relationships (Sorenson & Matsuoka, 2019a). Intersectionality is understood as a process of interacting with oppressive power relationships and as a force to shape social systems interactively and historically (see Choo & Ferree, 2010). Thus, our use of intersectionality focuses on mechanics and processes and moves beyond describing. The inclusion of speciesism in understanding intersectionality thus reveals mechanisms and processes of persistent oppressive relationships and affirms the importance of anti-speciesism in social justice.

After establishing the foundation for the course, it connects with intersectionality and interlocking relationships from

perspectives of 'saving animals, saving people.' For example, the growing focus of social workers in community planning for emergency disaster situations is discussed using resources from Colorado State University. Another is based on more well-established but not necessarily applied in practice—VAW/ IPV and violence against animals. Also, the course emphasises the significance of collaborating with animal welfare organisations in child welfare and in VAW/IPV to protect children and/or women and non-human animals from abuse and neglect. These highlight the importance of collaboration with sectors social workers do not typically consider.

Decolonising social work

Decolonisation is central to contemporary Canadian social work education to redress social workers' serious oppressive roles in past and ongoing colonisation. To support this direction, the course sheds a missing light on decolonisation and global capitalism through speciesist histories. Nibert (2013) argued that colonialism in the Caribbean and North America was possible because of the use and subjugation of animals. To highlight the oppression of both human and non-human animals to understand global capitalism and colonialism, thus, decolonisation fully, we emphasise anti-speciesism and introduce his term, *domesecration*, which is defined as "the systemic practice of violence in which social animals are enslaved and biologically manipulated, resulting in their objectification, subordination, and oppression" (Nibert, 2013, p. 12). Indigenous scholars' work (e.g., Koleszar-Green & Matsuoka, 2018; Snowshoe & Starblanket, 2016) are introduced simultaneously to demonstrate different epistemological and ontological stands further. The course also brings another form of colonialism, global capitalism, as current contexts of human–non-human animal relationships for students to examine and reflect on their praxis. This is mainly done through readings on human–canine relationships in Asia (see Sorenson & Matsuoka, 2019a) and audio-visual materials.

An additional concept introduced in the course is *truncated narrative of domination*, based on ecofeminist and CAS scholar, Kheel's term (2008), *truncated narrative*, to underscore oppression and dominance (see Koleszar-Green & Matsuoka, 2018). This concept unveils how some relationships and knowledge are taken-for-granted and, thus, remain unquestioned—truncated. We employed Koleszar-Green and Matsuoka (2018) and Snowshoe and Starblanket (2016) to highlight the persistent colonisation of Indigenous communities in Canada and the interlocking oppressive relationships between humans and non-human animals.

Mapping ontologies and epistemologies

Throughout the course, particular attention is paid to opportunities for students to increase awareness that ontology is not limited to human relationships or human–non-human animal relationships. It also intersects with multi-dimensional understandings of space and time. Space, encompassing air, land, and water, is indispensable for comprehending human–non-human animal relationships in economic and political systems, such as colonisation and global capitalism. We emphasise that relationships go beyond direct interactions and experiences, comprising symbolism, representations and metaphors (see also Sorenson & Matsuoka, 2019b). These approaches in course delivery are essential in helping students recognise that animals and social work are not limited to animal-assisted therapies or bringing live animals into their practice settings. Moreover, they foster awareness that achieving more just social relationships that transcend humans requires re-examining the use of representations, symbolism, and taken-for-granted expectations in our everyday practice. Today, students are

more willing to relate time, space, and representations in human–non-human animal relationships and reconsider anthropocentric ideas of justice than they were several years ago, especially where course materials and discussion intersect with climate and environmental crises.

The discussion of epistemology and ontology is integrated throughout the course by introducing articles and audio-visual resources (Matsuoka et al., 2024). Additionally, a mapping exercise developed by the first author, named "Mapping ontologies and epistemologies" is introduced. It is a visual and discussion-based exercise utilising three maps of North America (specifically Canada and the United States). This exercise addresses several key aspects of this course discussed above. First, a map represents multi-dimensional space and is a common symbolic tool depicting control of air, land and water by turning them into property and reinforcing division and ownership. Second, the maps used are those of current Canada and the United States and are, therefore, situated temporally within settler-colonial histories and present realities. Thus, it brings an opportunity to address the time and historical accumulation of colonisation that is not limited to human relationships but those with air, land and water. Third, maps are an excellent example of truncated narratives of domination, and the exercise provides a unique opportunity to explore anti-speciesism and anti-anthropocentric ontologies and epistemologies. Briefly, below, we introduce the exercise to show how the realisation of ontology and epistemology can be brought into everyday life.

Figure 1 Dominant Ideology of North American Geography

Note: From (Google, n.d.) (https://maps.app.goo.gl/HA1SFA3KTqNpGAB4A). In the public domain.

The first map is a conventional map (Figure 1). Students identified that its rigidity reflected borders between nations, states and provinces; the land was shown as separated, with clearly demarcated borders indicating ownership and division. In questioning what makes these borders *real* and who determines that, dialogue often turns to the dominant ontology represented in this map, i.e., settler-colonialism. In discussing epistemological assumptions implied through this visual, students identify it as the map they grew up with in education systems, representing a hegemonic view of space, i.e., air, land and water. This leads to discussions about enforcing borders, nation-building and questioning who benefits and loses from believing it accurately represents the world around us. Students recognise that this map truncated the dominant narrative, specifically the colonial narrative, as an assumed truth in education settings and daily practices.

The discussion of the second map generated by Indigenous Nations (see Figure 2) captures the ontology of shared responsibility with both land and water and its absence throughout their educational experience. Comparing the two maps elucidates the power and domination of settler-colonialism.

The third is an interactive map created in response to climate change in North America that illuminates the average movement of animal migrations, including birds, mammals and amphibians (Figure 3). The students shift the discussion outside of anthropocentric beliefs and recognize that to migrate and

Figure 2 Indigenous Nations on Turtle Island

Note: This map is a part of an active digital project, and therefore subject to change from the date of publication (https://native-land.ca/). In the public domain.

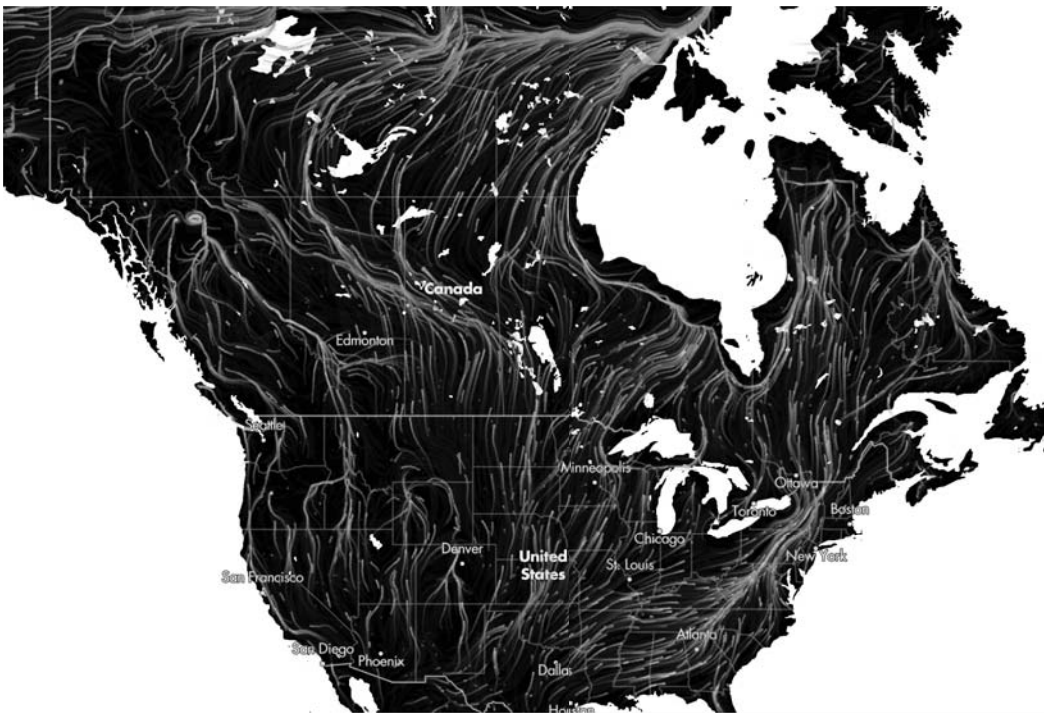

Figure 3 Migration Map of the United States and Canada

Note: From Majka (2017). (https://www.maps.tnc.org/migrations-in-motion/#4/54.03/-98.39). In the public domain.

adapt to changing landscapes, animals must possess their reality and knowledge of air, land, and water outside the constructs of human animals. However, non-human animals are unrecognized and often devalued. The exercise also requires students to consider the sentience and futures of different species outside of anthropogenic environmental perspectives that frequently centre on the loss and protection of species through human hierarchies of responsibility. This exercise prompted students to reflect on practice situations, going beyond personal lives, and how human–non-human animal relationships are coloured by truncated narratives of domination, such as truncated narratives of settler-colonialism and anthropocentrism.

Discussion

This article attempts to demonstrate how social work can look beyond conceptualising animals as resources for human benefit. By highlighting current social and legal challenges, existing knowledge on human–non-human animal relationships, and transformation efforts, the article argues for a change in social work's epistemological and ontological basis. The theoretical foundations provided by CAS and TSSJ encourage students to explore anti-anthropocentric and anti-speciesist ontological and epistemological perspectives. In particular, TSSJ extends social justice principles in social work beyond the dominant species (humans). By sharing the authors' teaching experiences, we demonstrated how such theoretical changes enable the critical analysis of power relationships and envision the practice of dismantling oppressive social systems that intersect with human and nonhuman animals. We also highlighted integrations of TSSJ in social work education to expand social workers' capacities to address justice.

Key concepts, such as *subject of a life*, *equal consideration of interests*, and *animals as property*, are useful in helping students expand their understanding of animal rights and animal welfare perspectives. Moreover, they help future social workers address systemic biases in human–non-human animal relationships. For example, the course expands on core social work theories of intersectionality and interlocking relationships by examining how speciesism intersects with other forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, ableism, and classism. This enables students to understand how systemic social contexts perpetuate oppressive conditions. Introducing truncated narratives of dominations supports students' capacity to recognise normalised oppression and domination in relationships and knowledge systems as they pertain to all living beings.

Engaging in discussions about ontology and epistemology is an essential tool for critical social workers to integrate in practice across diverse fields. Exercises based on CAS facilitate recognizing and contemplating socially constructed multiple realities, leading to a more profound praxis. Simultaneously, CAS allows students to consider all-encompassing liberation.

Canadian social work has been developed through modern Western philosophy, which Descartes and Kant have influenced. Their views were anthropocentric and speciesist. Therefore, continuation of anthropocentrism and speciesism within Canadian social work is unsurprising. Cartesian dualism of mind and body has been utilised to create a hierarchical distinction between humans and non-human animals. Kant's view also endorsed a hierarchical distinction between 'persons' and 'things,' enabling 'things' to be used as a means to the ends of 'persons.' Not all humans and persons are equal in their views, and both Descartes and Kant were identified as providing justifications for colonialism and modern capitalism (Nibert, 2013). The efforts to challenge anthropocentrism and speciesism, thus, intersect with colonial biases that Canadian social work education must address. This requires selecting course readings and films to allow political-economy analyses. Importantly, addressing animal issues plays a significant role in decolonisation.

Finally, CAS is developed through collaboration with activists and scholars, and some find a way to be both (Nocella et al., 2014). The CAS knowledge base includes emotions. Thus, future courses that integrate this perspective should support students in recognising their emotional responses as valuable. This enables appreciation of embodied knowledge and recognises "ethics of responsibilities" (Gilligan, 1982), in sustaining significant relationships with non-human animals. Social work courses engaging with CAS should ultimately encourage students to be activists/professionals because they are the ones who transform social work's epistemologies and ontologies of practice.

Conclusion

This article argues that a transformative shift in social work education requires more than additional knowledge/evidence. It necessitates creating opportunities to challenge its anthropocentric and speciesist epistemologies and ontologies, which bring theoretical changes in education to strengthen social workers' capacities to address justice. In response, this article highlights a critical chance to challenge these through a CAS perspective and embrace trans-species social justice (TSSJ). Anti-speciesist relationships are possible by transcending anthropocentric views and recognizing animals as more than resources. Although the examples provide transformative potential for integrating CAS and TSSJ into education, we believe these can be integrated beyond a dedicated course on animals and social work. Further research is needed. Additional efforts to

incorporate these principles throughout curricula are crucial for widespread adoption and impact. By embracing trans-species social justice, social work education can enable practitioners to be activists/professionals to dismantle interlocking oppressive systems and advance justice for all beings.

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