Care farms, social work and animals: A cautionary tale

Kathryn Lelliott, Queensland University of Technology

The term *care farm* refers to place-based therapeutic care practices that take place on farms, including those involved in the meat and dairy industries. Care farms aim to promote health and wellbeing by engaging participants in purposeful farm work and structured farming-related activities (Hine et al., 2008). Because so many activities take place outside, and often in rural areas, they are often considered as part of green and/or nature-based therapies. In the Thera Farms Australia example, the focus is on helping people to recover from mental ill health (Thera Farms Australia, 2022). However, care farming has been offered to diverse groups of people, including but not limited to people with physical and intellectual disabilities (Anderson et al., 2017; Kaley et al., 2019); dementia (De Bruin et al., 2009); problems of addiction (Ellings & Hassink, 2008); and traumatic grief (Gorman & Cacciatore, 2020). Most participants value connecting with, and caring for, animals above all other care-farming activities (Hassink et al., 2017; Leck et al., 2014).

It is understandable, given the human-centric focus of social work, which has led to animals being regarded as therapeutic tools, that social workers might view care farms from a purely human perspective, as examples of innovative community-based service providers that improve people's quality of life, and neglect consideration of how animals are positioned in care-farming ventures (Hassink et al., 2010; Taylor & Twine, 2014; Taylor et al., 2016). A critical animal studies lens corrects this anthropocentric blindspot and brings into focus the benefits and disadvantages of care farming for all participants, including those who are farmed.

Benefits of care farming for humans

Since the emergence of the first care farms across the Netherlands in the 1940s (Hassink et al., 2014), care farming has become a well-established movement throughout Europe, providing farmers with a new set of possibilities and income streams.

Some of the allure of care farming is that human participants are referred to as farm workers rather than [stigmatised public welfare] clients, providing many members of devalued groups a sense of dignity. Many participants report feeling a new sense of purpose and meaning which, in turn, leads to improved mood and self-esteem (Hine et al., 2008). For humans, there are the potential benefits of being outdoors and interacting with animals, improving physical fitness, strength building and tackling tasks often never completed before. For example, in Kaley et al.'s (2019) visual ethnographic study that focuses on the health and wellbeing effects of care farming for people diagnosed with intellectual disabilities, participant James reports: "I'm stronger now … I lifted a big bag of compost the other day that was heavy. I was digging at 100 miles an hour Monday … and I'm much broader now" (Kaley et al., 2019, p. 18).

In Australia, where the care farming movement is in its infancy, the underdevelopment is represented as a missed opportunity (Brewer, 2019, 2022). According to beef farmer Judith Brewer (2022, pp. 4–5), care farming is a ''… win win win win process" for: a) farmers who can diversify production and service offerings, and access additional income streams;

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *37(1)*, 179–183.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Kathryn Lelliott
kathryn.lelliott@connect.qut.edu.au

b) socially devalued and vulnerable people, who can benefit from participating in care farming programmes; c) rural communities, who benefit from the associated trade; d) governments and other state authorities, and e) the natural environment.

Disadvantages of care farming for animals

The diversification of farms and the creation of the role of *care farmer* positioned farmed animals as *product* ripe for diversification. The term *farmed animals* rather than *farm animals* tries to signal that farming is done *to* non-human animals and does not define them. How does care farming—particularly care farming involving the slaughter of animals—represent a "win" for them? And how can anything involving slaughter be labelled "care"?

A critical animal studies (CAS) lens helps us to see all forms of oppression—including the oppression of animals (Fraser & Taylor, 2020). It makes clear that every farmed animal is a social being, who matters for their own sake, wants to live, has their own needs and interests, and is deserving of rights (Ryan, 2011; Taylor & Twine, 2014). A CAS lens also helps us to remain cognisant that farming animals for slaughter is inherently violent and incompatible with a socially just and egalitarian world. A CAS perspective is concerned with the structurally embedded power mechanisms that obscure this understanding and carve cruel dichotomising lines between human and non-human animals, manufacturing human–animal relationships that are defined by human dominance and commodify animal lives (Adams, 1990; Plumwood, 1986). A CAS lens corrects the anthropocentric blindspot, which legitimises the capitalist extraction of therapeutic usefulness from the foreshortened and confined lives of farmed species, further exploiting their bodies and labour, to deliver marketised cross-species relationships of care (Fraser et al., 2017; Taylor & Twine, 2014).

The therapeutic work of farmed animals, such as chickens, pigs, cows, sheep and goats, is so critical to the commercial success of most care farming ventures, and positive care farming experiences for participants, the majority of whom value relationships with farmed animals above all other care farming activities, that farmed animals are described as "the fabric of care farms" (Hassink et al., 2017, p. 8; Leck et al., 2014). Yet many are slaughtered. The narratives of marginalised young people, with lived experience of completing a six-month residential care farm programme, on industrialised pig, dairy cow, and chicken farms in The Netherlands, as an alternative to enrolment in the youth justice system, include testimony of a 15-year-old who worked more than a 12-hour day assisting with the slaughtering of chickens (Hassink et al., 2017; Schreuder et al., 2014). Gorman (2017), who conducted a 6-month ethnographic study on a Welsh community care farm recounts the distress and confusion of a group of marginalised children who witness the farmer chop off the head of Snowflake the Cockerel, with whom they had built a special connection over their weeks of attendance at the farm. Fell-Chambers' (2020) ethnographic study on a working care farm captures the strength of the bond that participants can form with chickens in the narrative of 14-year-old Max, who is asked why he is taking a photo of Miss Wonky the Chicken:

> Max: "*She was my first friend I met"*
>
> F-C*: "How do you feel when you're in there with the chickens?"*
>
> Max*: "I feel loved."* (Fell-Chambers, 2020, p. 173)

Many social workers, including those who work within care-farming spaces, will be concerned by these accounts. Yet it is likely that this concern will centre around the human care-farming participants, and the ethical complexities of commissioning working farms to deliver welfare processes,

rather than any moral concern for the chickens who are slaughtered (Gorman, 2017). This is understandable given the structurally embedded speciesism which underpins social work's anthropocentric social justice focus, and the barriers that prevent educators from including non-human animals in the social work curricula (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023)

Much of the care-farming literature is saturated in romanticised rhetoric and the language of care, promoting farms as part of nature and farming as natural. Happy animals are positioned as willingly enrolled in care-farming practices, contented companions to participants before they are killed to become human food. This serves the interests of the farmed animal industry, providing farmers with a social licence to operate, which reinforces animal exploitation and oppression (Cole, 2011).

It is argued that care farms can be good for farmed animals, that they benefit from the attention of participants, and become so used to human presence that being caught for slaughter is less stressful (Gorman, 2017; Leck et al., 2014). Care-farming participants and visitors to the farm can negatively impact the welfare of animals through inadvertently injuring them, introducing disease, and causing care-farm workers, who must prioritise the optimisation of the human experience, to neglect the animals (Gorman, 2019). Being made available for the caring attention of care-farming participants affects farmed animals' agency to pursue their own interests and express their full range of natural behaviours (Gorman, 2019).

Furthermore, many of the farming practices framed by farmers as care, such as removing calves from their mothers are, in fact, inherently cruel. Fell-Chambers' ethnographic study captures the diary excerpt of a 15-year-old enrolled in a care-farming programme, who describes how he has learnt to "wean calves from cows to allow cows to recover" (Fell-Chambers, 2020, p. 179). The ethics of representing such practices as caring and in the best interests of animals to the care-farming participants who undertake these tasks, making them unknowingly complicit in harming animals, must be questioned.

Care farms for animals

To live up to their title, care farms should be places where empathy is demonstrated to all sentient beings, not just humans. Empathy is a cornerstone of social work and is crucial to dignifying care practices (Gerdes & Segal, 2011). Extending the empathic process across species lines to farmed animals is critical to disrupting the most arrogant and pernicious form of human chauvinism that designates some species of animal as farmable products (Gruen, 2014). Empathy can enable social workers who have not already done so to reevaluate their relationships with farmed animals in egalitarian ways and be care-fully attentive to every farmed animal as an individual someone. As a young care-farming participant discovers:

> Cows are like human beings, each cow has its own character. You get to know them. I never expected that. It was always the same cow that approached me when I entered the stable, and always the same cow that did not want to be milked by the robot. (Hassink et al., 2017, p. 14)

In their study of 27 European and American farms that underwent a *transfarmation* process Salliou (2023) found that extending empathy to the cows, pigs, chickens, and goats they previously treated as *livestock* was the main reason that farmers transitioned from animal farming. Machowicz and Diethelm's (2022) film follows Sarah Heiligtag, founder of the Swiss concept of *transfarmation* as she supports animal farmers to transition to vegan farming. The farmers in Salliou's (2023) study particularly expressed: sensitivity to the suffering of animals sent to slaughter and mother cows and their calves who were separated; love

for their animals as individuals; recognition of the rights of animals to live full and flourishing lives; and acknowledgement of the injustice of killing animals that are no longer economically productive. A third of the farms transitioned to become farmed animal sanctuaries and one became an ethical care farm (Salliou, 2023). Ethical care farms are vegan and are equally attentive to the wellbeing and flourishing of non-human and human care-farming participants (Butler, 2023; Cacciatore et al., 2020). A special level of sensitivity and critical reflexivity must, however, be afforded to rescued farmed animals, who may not wish to undertake any form of therapeutic work with humans (Taylor et al., 2016).

A critical animal studies lens reveals with alarming clarity the ethical complexities and injustices of conventional care farming. Ethical care farms are sites of resistance that extend the values and aims of social work across species lines and foster human–animal relationships that are grounded in respect and benefit human and non-human care-farming participants.

Acknowledgement

I would like to thank Associate Professor Heather Fraser from QUT Social Work, for the support and guidance given to this article.

References

Adams, C. J. (1990). *The sexual politics of meat: A feminist-vegetarian critical theory*. Continuum.

Anderson, K. A., Chapin, K. P., Reimer, Z., & Siffri, G. (2017). On fertile ground: An initial evaluation of green care farms in the United States. *Home Health Care Services Quarterly, 36*(1), 1–15. https://doi.org/10.1080/01621424.2017.1291390

Brewer, J. (2019). *Judith Brewer, Vic 2019. Churchill Trust*. churchilltrust.com.au

Brewer, J. (2022). *Caring for farming*. https://www.churchilltrust.com.au/fellow/judith-brewer-vic-2019/

Butler, R. (2023). *Are humans good for goats? Assessing the welfare of goats engaged in human interaction in a care farm setting* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Pennsylvania. https://repository.upenn.edu/handle/20.500.14332/2742

Cacciatore, J., Gorman, R., & Thieleman, K. (2020). Evaluating care farming as a means to care for those in trauma and grief. *Health & Place*, *62*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.healthplace.2019.102281

Cole, M. (2011). From "animal machines" to "happy meat"? Foucault's ideas of disciplinary and pastoral power applied to 'animal-centred'welfare discourse. *Animals*, *1*(1), 83–101.

De Bruin, S. R., Oosting, S. J., Kuin, Y., Hoefnagels, E. C., Blauw, Y. H., Groot, L. C. D., & Schols, J. M. (2009). Green care farms promote activity among elderly people with dementia. *Journal of Housing for the Elderly*, *23*(4), 368–389. https://doi.org/10.1080/02763890903327275

Duvnjak, A., & Dent, A. (2023). The consideration of animals within Australian social work curriculum. *Australian Social Work*, 1–13.

Elings, M., & Hassink, J. (2008). Green care farms, a safe community between illness or addiction and the wider society. *Therapeutic Communities*, *29*(3), 310–322.

Fell-Chambers, R. (2020). Care farming, learning and young people: An exploration into the possible contribution of care farming to young people's engagement with learning [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Hull. https://bgro.repository.guildhe.ac.uk/id/eprint/814/1/Fell-Chambers_care%20farming.pdf

Fraser, H., & Taylor, N. (2020). Critical (animal) social work: Insights from ecofeminist and critical animal studies in the context of neoliberalism. In. C. Morley, P. Ablett., C. Noble, & S. Cowden, (Eds.), *The Routledge handbook of critical pedagogies for social work* (pp. 296–309). Routledge.

Fraser, H., Taylor, N., & Morley, C. (2017). Critical social work and cross-species care: An intersectional perspective on ethics, principles, and practices. In B. Pease, A. Vreugdenhil & S. Stanford (Eds.), *Critical ethics of care in social work* (pp. 229–240). Routledge.

Gerdes, K. E., & Segal, E. (2011). Importance of empathy for social work practice: Integrating new science. *Social Work*, *56*(2), 141–148.

Gorman, R. (2017). Therapeutic landscapes and non-human animals: The roles and contested positions of animals within care farming assemblages, *Social & Cultural Geography*, *18*(3), 315–335. https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2016.1180424

Gorman, R. (2019). What's in it for the animals? Symbiotically considering therapeutic human-animal relations within spaces and practices of care farming. *Medical Humanities, 45*(3), 313–325. https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2018-011627

Gorman, R., & Cacciatore, J. (2020). Care-farming as a catalyst for healthy and sustainable lifestyle choices in those affected by traumatic grief. *NJAS-Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences*, *92*. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.njas.2020.100339

Gruen, L. (2014). *Entangled empathy: An alternative ethic for our relationships with animals*. Lantern Books.

Hassink, J., De Bruin, S. R., Berget, B, & Elings, M. (2017). Exploring the role of farm animals in providing care at care farms. *Animals, 7*(6). https://doi.org/10.3390/ani7060045

Hassink, J., Elings, M., Zweekhorst, M., van den Nieuwenhuizen, N., & Smit, A. (2010). Care farms in the Netherlands: Attractive empowerment-oriented and strengths-based practices in the community. *Health & Place*, *16*(3), 423–430.

Hassink, J., Hulsink, W., & Grin, J. (2014). Farming with care: The evolution of care farming in the Netherlands. *NJAS - Wageningen Journal of Life Sciences, 68*(1), 1–11.

Hine, R., Peacock, J., & Pretty, J. (2008). Care farming in the UK: Contexts, benefits, and links with therapeutic communities. *Therapeutic Communities*, *29*(3), 245–260.

Kaley, A., Hatton, C., & Milligan, C. (2019). Therapeutic spaces of care farming: transformative or ameliorating? *Social Science & Medicine*, *227*, 10–20. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2018.05.011

Leck, C., Evans, N., & Upton, D. (2014). Agriculture–Who cares? An investigation of 'care farming' in the UK. *Journal of Rural Studies*, *34*, 313–325.

Machowicz, T., & Diethelm, S. (Directors). (2022). *The Unbound Project – Sarah Heiligtag, Founder of Transfarmation* [Film]. We Animals Media. https://unboundproject.org/sarah-heiligtag-founder-of-transfarmation/

Plumwood, V. (1986). Ecofeminism: An overview and discussion of positions and arguments. *Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 64*(sup1), 120–138.

Ryan, T. (2011). *Animals and social work: A moral introduction.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Salliou, N. (2023). Quitting livestock farming: transfarmation pathways and factors of change from post-livestock farmers' accounts. *Frontiers in Sustainable Food Systems*, *7*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fsufs.2023.1122992

Schreuder, E., Rijnders, M., Vaandrager, L., Hassink, J., Enders-Slegers, M. J., & Kennedy, L. (2014). Exploring salutogenic mechanisms of an outdoor experiential learning programme on youth care farms in the Netherlands: Untapped potential? *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, *19*(2), 139–152.

Taylor, N., Fraser, H., Signal, T., & Prentice, K. (2016). Social work, animal-assisted therapies, and ethical considerations: A programme example from Central Queensland, Australia. *The British Journal of Social Work*, *46*, 135–152.

Taylor, N., & Twine, R. (2014). Locating the "critical" in critical animal studies. In N. Taylor & R. Twine (Eds.), The *rise of critical animal studies: From the margins to the centre* (pp. 1–15). Taylor & Francis Group.

Thera Farms Australia. (2022). https://www.therafarms.com.au/