"The workers are usually really heartbroken": Interspecies practice as a site of moral distress

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article provides an account of practitioner perspectives of the difficulties they faced in enacting interspecies practice in Australia. The concept of moral distress can be used to understand both the cause and consequences of being unable to act in accordance with social work ethical codes and personal values in a professional context. Practice that engages with families who are comprised of human and more-than-human members entails extra complexity, given the anthropocentrism of the all-too-human services. The challenges that enacting interspecies practice with families in safety and housing crises entails gives rise to a range of affective responses.

METHODS: Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse and understand accounts from practitioners describing interspecies practice in the Australian homelessness and family violence sectors, drawn from qualitative data from survey responses and in-depth interviews with social workers and other human services practitioners.

FINDINGS: Three key themes describe the challenges of interspecies practice, illustrating the affective responses articulated by practitioners and how these could be navigated. These themes are discussed and interpreted through the concept of *moral distress*.

CONCLUSION: The implications of centring practitioners' affective responses and moral distress are discussed.

Keywords: Social work, companion animals, domestic violence, family violence, homelessness, moral distress

The *social* in contemporary social work practice is a more-than-human endeavour. The number of interspecies families, or social groups comprised of human and non-human members has been steadily increasing over time. In Aotearoa/New Zealand at the time of writing, 64% of homes contained one or more companion animal (Companion Animals New Zealand, 2020), and 69% of Australian homes are interspecies (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022). Consequently, it is highly likely that social workers and other human services practitioners will encounter interspecies families in their work (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023; Laing, 2020).

Social work codes of ethics have been updated to include companion animals in recent years. An example of this is the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2019, p. 11), which states "[w]e recognise the sentience

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of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected". The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) *Code of Ethics* states that workers must "ensure that any animal engaged as part of social work practice is protected" (AASW, 2020, p. 13). Despite this ethical and moral imperative, protecting companion animals while caring for their humans proves challenging in the contemporary context.

This article provides an account of practitioner perspectives of the challenges to enacting interspecies practice in the Australian context. These perspectives are interpreted through the concept of moral distress, and implications for practice are discussed.

Interspecies practice in social work: Anthropocentric systems of constraint

Scholarship calling for the social work discipline to be an interspecies concern has been increasing from the early 2000s onwards, and several studies worldwide have sought to quantify its prevalence as part of this project (Bennett et al., 2022; Hanrahan, 2013; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Yeung et al., 2020). Inclusion of the human–animal bond (HAB) in social work coursework and field education is on the rise (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). However, interspecies practice remains in an emergent state, which has been attributed to the confluence of anthropocentrism and the risk aversion and thwarting of innovation caused by neoliberal managerialism (Taylor et al., 2020).

Social isolation is common for people with trauma histories (Applebaum et al., 2021; Scanlon et al., 2020), who make up a large proportion of the service users with whom social workers and other practitioners engage. Their companion animals become a vital source of social support, as well as being individuals who themselves require

care (Fraser & Taylor, 2021). Service delivery that is designed for humans often cannot accommodate non-humans, and this is particularly evident in the homelessness and family violence sectors (Laing, 2020 & 2021; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Matsuoka et al., 2020; Strand & Faver, 2005; Taylor et al., 2020).

The perceived risk of extending accommodation to companion animals often results in their exclusion from refuge, which has implications for the take up of services by their guardians (Cronley et al., 2009; Scanlon et al., 2020; Stone et al., 2021). When service delivery is unable to accommodate companion animals—literally or relative to other supports—service users will refuse support that does not recognise the presence of their non-human family members. Victim/survivors of family violence often delay leaving unsafe homes due to legitimate concern about the safety of their companion animals, who can be weaponised as a tactic of coercive control (Ascione et al., 1997; Collins et al., 2018; Hageman et al., 2018; Wuerch et al., 2020). People who are already in housing crises or unhoused will remain so rather than be separated from a vital source of love and support (Irvine, 2013; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011).

Where people in housing or safety crises do take up refuge, this most often necessitates separation from their non-human family members, who can be placed in temporary foster care with friends or volunteers, or in commercial boarding. If these options are not available, companion animals are likely to be surrendered (Gupta & McDonald, 2023; Kotzmann et al., 2022) where they "often experience considerable distress when separated from their families" (Ma et al., 2023, p. 9). In cases where the animals are deemed behaviourally unsuitable for rehoming, they are likely to be euthanised (Guenther, 2020; Ma et al., 2023).

The complexity of interspecies practice due to systemic constraints to inclusion

of animals in practice, combined with the importance of relationship in interspecies families who are in safety and housing crises converges into a challenging practice context that can be highly stressful for workers. However, this distress is rarely explored in extant scholarship from social work and related professions. In the next section, I introduce the concept of moral distress as a framework to explore these tensions.

Moral distress

This article uses the concept of *moral distress* to interpret practitioner accounts of interspecies practice. Moral distress can be used to understand both the cause and consequences of being unable to act in accordance with social work ethical codes and personal values in a professional context. According to bioethicist Jameton (1984, p. 6), moral distress is elicited in situations "when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action" and is associated with a lack of practitioner agency. Institutional constraints can include "instructions from superiors, institutional guidelines and lack of time or resources" (Palma Contreras & Pardo Adriasola, 2024, p. 5). The psychosocial impacts of moral distress can result in burnout, compassion fatigue, or leaving a stressful role as a coping strategy (Fronek et al., 2017).

Human services practice and, in particular, social work, is informed by ethical codes to guide practice (Fronek et al., 2017). Workers can experience the effects of moral distress where there is a tension between their desired action in accordance with their ethical standpoint, and the organisational or institutional constraints upon doing so. Distinct from an ethical dilemma, which occurs on an individual level and describes "two or more courses of action that are in conflict" (Weinberg, 2009, p. 144), a practitioner can experience moral distress

if one scenario is preferred but unable to be enacted due to structural constraints. Weinberg (2009, p. 141) argued that the concept of moral distress helps workers tie "the personal to the political by recognising the institutional factors that hamper [them] from functioning in ways they would deem ethical, as well as the emotional fallout of those difficulties". Her definition emphasises the experience of emotional pain at the centre of moral distress, which is an important link from the structural to the personal.

Method

Part of a broader doctoral study of practitioner accounts of interspecies practice (see Laing, 2020, 2021), this article draws on practitioners' affective experiences and responses to the complexity of interspecies practice. Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022) was used to analyse qualitative data that entailed open-ended questions from 90 survey responses, and transcripts from 17 semi-structured, in-depth interviews with social workers and other human services practitioners in the Australian homelessness and family violence sectors, collected in 2018. Ethics approval was granted by the author's university, and pseudonyms were assigned to participants to ensure anonymity.

Findings

Three key themes describe the challenges of interspecies practice, illustrating the affective responses articulated by practitioners and how these could be navigated.

Challenges in accommodating interspecies families

The first theme relates to the practical challenges of accommodating interspecies families. The majority of participants had to encourage interspecies families to enter a state of uncertainty to escape safety and housing crises. This was due to a lack of

companion animal-friendly refuges and other accommodation appropriate for all interspecies family members. Molly explained she often had to tell service users "…where you're going to go, I don't know, and how long you'll be staying in the next accommodation? I don't know, and whether your pet will come with you? … I can't give them any pathway".

Where companion animalfriendly accommodation was unavailable, service users would often resist calls from to surrender their animals and remain homeless or in unsafe homes. "I have seen people walk back onto the streets refusing to be without their pets", Caitlyn said. Marian elaborates further:

> Failure to offer [accommodation] results in women remaining in violent situations or choosing unsafe accommodation where their pets can accompany them. This is unacceptable. The protection of the animals themselves in these contexts is also essential.

Participants empathised and understood why they would not want to be separated from their family members:

> That's where people say, they've got a choice whether to leave the dog and come, and I say, that's not a choice … This animal is part of their family, it's a part of their safety, it's a part of their comfort, their emotional connection, and then you're saying "choose". It's dreadful. (Molly)

Sophie articulates her response to a service user who stayed in her car rather than being in refuge that would not accommodate her dog:

> … that's a really difficult thing … from a workers' perspective, and from a safety perspective… it's hard to know that that's the choice that she's making, she's choosing …the companionship of her dog over her immediate safety. (Sophie)

Greta described it as "heartbreaking to have to encourage them to part with them and equally heartbreaking to see a woman have no choice but to remain homeless so that she can remain with her companion animal."

Affective responses to the challenges of interspecies practice

The next theme illustrates practitioner responses to the difficulties described in the first theme. Practitioners expressed a range of emotions in response to the challenges of interspecies practice: "The workers are usually really heartbroken by the situation", said Caitlyn. "We desperately want options for the person and the pet".

Meg described how the work affected her: "I think system burnout is just something that just compounds and there is no system for animals, so it's probably one of the hardest things. I know it's my trigger…". In our interview she went on to describe how empathy informs her approach: "As an animal lover, I understand that you won't leave them behind, I understand that you're going to put your life on the line for protecting your animals". Her perspective contrasted with those of her colleagues, who delegitimised the bond in interspecies families and her response to it. "For a lot of people, they just look at that as a silly risk, that maybe they can't hold that level of emotional attachment, understand what the relationship means".

In the following quote, Penelope articulates how it felt for her to be powerless to assist:

> … it makes me really really sad, and it always made me really sad … because I would always want to help people, and would feel like I was stuck, like I couldn't really create the effect of change that I wanted to create.

She used her feelings of sadness at not being able to house interspecies families together as a motivation to resist the challenges she

faced: "I think holding onto that, but using it in a positive way, so really taking that feeling and trying my hardest to kind of eradicate [the exclusion of animals] …is really important to me. But it does make me sad". This final example leads to the last theme in this article.

Resistance as interspecies practice

The final theme relates to ways that participants worked to transcend challenges to enact interspecies practice. In contrast to the distress of being powerless to accommodate companion animals in their practice, accounts of resistance were shared with enthusiasm, defiance and, at times, laughter. Practices involved non-compliance with policy that excluded companion animals, such as turning a blind eye to the presence of pets when they were present at intake, or more blatant resistance such as smuggling companion animals into spaces that did not officially allow them.

Participants enlisted in the method of "turning a blind eye" to gain accommodation for animals. This example shows Emmeline coaching a service user to enable her to do so:

> [Agency] won't support you with a letter saying that you don't have a dog … I would need you to tell me that you won't take the dog … and if you told me that, I could write you a letter supporting you to get the property; and was all a bit of wink, wink like I know you're going to take the dog to the property…

Lynn demonstrates turning a blind eye where she discusses a service user who has "taken their dog to our safe house, where they're not supposed to have dogs" but she pretends that she has not noticed. "They've had chickens at that house, and I don't see those chickens", she said, eyes twinkling with mirth.

Resistance practices also entailed taking on companion animals as temporary foster carer. Ruby said, "I have heard of previous managers saying … 'I'll take the dog … for a few nights', and if I didn't have a dog, I would have done that myself." Similarly, Penelope's resistance entailed "getting staff to take the pets home, if they had pets and they were pet lovers … trying to come up with new ways where that bond can be maintained".

Finally, Molly described colleagues who brokered foster care among workmates for companion animals that they encountered in their practice. As she was describing their work, I reflected to her, "Your face just lit up when you started talking about [the colleagues]", and she exclaimed, "I love people who are really passionate about anything, but they do something extra. I've got a lot of admiration for them, because they take on extra on top of their work".

Discussion

In this section of the article, I use the concept of moral distress to interpret practitioner accounts of the difficulty of enacting interspecies practice in the contemporary context. The themes I have presented exemplify catalysts for, or consequences of moral distress. Jameton's (1984) conceptualisation of moral distress states that it is contingent on a constraint to being able to enact morally correct practice, as assessed by an individual worker. In the context of this research, 'the right thing to do' is interspecies practice.

Findings associated with the first theme aligned with extant literature (Cronley et al., 2009; Hageman et al., 2018; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Strand & Faver, 2005; Taylor et al., 2020). For social workers and other human services practitioners in this study, there were multiple layers of constraints that contributed to being unable to assist interspecies families. On top of the resourcing constraints from decades of neoliberal managerialism (Palma Contreras & Pardo Adriasola, 2024; Weinberg, 2009),

the anthropocentric legacy of humanism (Boetto, 2018) has led to service delivery that cannot perceive and attend to the needs of companion animals (Taylor et al., 2020). In this challenging landscape, being unable to access housing to accommodate companion animals resulted in distress on the part of the practitioners, who were unable to act in accordance with the ethical guidelines of their profession, and their personal beliefs associated with the HAB. Bernhardt and colleagues (2021) found that practitioners unable to provide equal access to services that were discriminatory to sex workers, substance users and other service users was a contributor to moral distress. The discrimination against interspecies families inherent in anthropocentric service systems of exclusion can also be interpreted as a driver of moral distress for workers in this study.

Accounts in the second theme contained feelings of distress that arose from an inability to enact interspecies practice. As reported by Fronek and colleagues (2017), participants in this study expressed sadness, frustration, and anger in their survey and interview responses. This moral distress arose from the empathy they felt for service users who were being pressured to surrender their companion animals to gain safe housing, the lack of support the workers were getting from their agencies, and the concern participants had for the plight of the companion animals. Moral distress literature can pathologise some affect such as anger as a "mental health consequence" (Palma Contreras & Pardo Adriasola, 2024), rather than being a reasonable response to being unable to practise ethically, and a possible source of motivation for change.

The final theme described practices of resistance, which were shared with joy and hope that change was possible, as opposed to the negative affect in accounts in the previous theme. Weinberg suggests there is a continuum of responses to moral distress: At one end is to disengage and remain stuck, and at the other end are overt or covert

practices of resistance (Fronek et al., 2017; Laing, 2021). Resistance, which has been well theorised in social work (see Greenslade et al., 2015, and Strier & Bershtling, 2016), is a way of navigating the limitations posed by the 'all-too-human services' on interspecies practice (Laing, 2020; Lindsay, 2022). As practised by participants in this study, resistance in social work can involve turning a blind eye and other forms of noncompliance (Greenslade et al., 2015). In an interspecies practice context, taking animals home (and thus resolving moral distress) is a form of resistance that has been reported elsewhere (Hageman et al., 2018; Lindsay 2022) in contexts where practice is otherwise impossible.

Conclusions and implications for practice

In this study, as exemplified through the accounts presented in this article, participants articulated the sources and consequences of moral distress in their capacity to support interspecies families. Extant scholarship agrees that the problem of enacting interspecies practice lies with hegemonic anthropocentrism (Fraser & Taylor 2021; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Taylor et al., 2020). While its dismantlement is a monumental project requiring material and discursive change on the macro level, there is scope to challenge it on the micro and mezzo (Bernardt et al., 2021) by drawing on practice wisdom of workers who are already enacting—or attempting to enact—interspecies practice. Framing this work as being associated with moral distress has utility to link it to broader challenges faced by the profession and moves to resist and dismantle constraints in other fields that result in discrimination and exclusion.

For social workers experiencing moral distress, enacting practices of resistance can be a way to transform their suffering. Mobilising with colleagues can also end the silence of moral distress (Weinberg, 2009) by building interspecies practice networks within and beyond individual

workplaces. Subversive acts such as careful non-compliance have the potential to move the sector towards more progressive policy and practice frameworks (Laing & Maylea, 2018; Greenslade et al., 2017), particularly in relation to the treatment of companion animals. Acknowledging moral distress in discussions with service users, performed with care is a way of building solidarity, and recruiting their lived expertise as partners in resistance. These practices to transcend moral distress have applicability in contexts beyond interspecies practice, within any setting where institutional discrimination impacts on service users at the margins and the practitioners endeavouring to advocate on their behalf.

Future research could further explore affect in interspecies service provision, as mobilising practitioners' responses to moral distress in this way has potential to further develop social work as a profession for all beings.

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