Animals and Social Work

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Social work research, like the arts, humanities and social sciences, has slowly begun to embrace the so-called *animal turn*. However, the inclusion of animals in social work curricula and training remains rare, leaving the humanist underpinnings of the discipline unchallenged. For example, when animals are included in codes of ethics, statements remain limited to recognitions of companion animal sentience and the attendant welfare concerns this might raise (see AASW, 2020; ANZASW, 2019; Hagena et al., 2022). Yet, as Adamson and Lowe (2020, p. 5) argued in a previous special edition of this journal focused on animals and social work, the "implications of regarding animals as sentient beings puts on our agenda issues of consumption, commodification, welfare and relationship".

Social work has much to gain learning about, and from, animals. For example, more than two decades of international research has shown that animal abuse and family violence are linked, and that people who hurt animals are much more likely to hurt people, and more severely (Becker & French, 2004). This recognition has led to calls for family violence services to adopt companion-animal inclusive practices (Taylor et al., 2020). It has also resulted in numerous women's shelters accommodating companion animals (see Pet Refuge NZ; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Similarly, recognition of the importance of the human–animal bond has led to social programmes aimed at diverse communities and populations, and many of these involve social workers. For example, consider free veterinary services for people sleeping rough with their animals (see *Pets in the Park*, Australia-wide; *Street Tails*, Wellington) or how programmes such as *Pups in Prison* (Queensland) have enabled incarcerated groups help rehabilitate through expressing care and empathy for dogs while inside (see Thompson, 2020). Or how endeavours like *Fossil Creek Farm Trust* and *Happy Paws, Happy Hearts* offer humans with significant mental health challenges and other experiences of trauma the opportunity for recovery though ongoing groups involving rescue kitten socialisation and wildlife rehabilitation, including animals affected by disasters.

We believe these programmes have the potential to be inspiring and relevant and need greater recognition. At the same time, however, we need to consider the positioning of the animals involved in such ventures and ask how social work can contribute—ensuring both best practice and the theoretical development regarding the roles of animals in such programmes (and this includes critique; see e.g., Evans & Gray, 2012).

In calling for papers for the current special edition, our aims were to highlight social workers and others already doing human–animal work to stimulate discussion about the roles and place of animals in social work. We deliberately sought a variety of perspectives across the continuum of animal welfare and animal rights in order to provoke consideration of the role of social work as a discipline and social workers as practitioners in advancing the field of animal-inclusive social work. As a result, we have collated a wide variety of research and commentary. Some of this remains human-focussed or -centred, detailing the ways in which animal-based social work can help humans. Other articles take issue with the underlying humanism of social work and consider some of the challenges social work

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faces if it is to take a more radical direction in the future, one that recognises animals as more than aids to human welfare.

The organisation of this edition follows this trajectory. First up, Rebecca Conway and Tara Barrett explore how equine-assisted interventions promote social inclusion for young people with disabilities. Using qualitative research methods, the study examines an equestrian training programme at Festina Lente, an Irish charity offering equine-assisted services. The study identifies four key themes: (1) the human–animal bond where participants formed strong emotional connections with horses, which enhanced their sense of belonging and social interaction; (2) the natural environment aiding learning where the outdoor setting provided a supportive learning environment, improving engagement and cognitive development; (3) the calming effect of horses, helping students manage stress and emotional regulation, and (4) animal welfare in that the programme emphasised the ethical treatment of horses, ensuring their welfare alongside human benefits. The authors argue that equine-assisted interventions offer innovative opportunities for social workers to support marginalised groups. They advocate for an interdisciplinary, eco-social approach that integrates human and animal wellbeing. This equine-assisted case study highlights their potential to improve the social, emotional, and vocational prospects of young people living with disabilities.

Following this, Lesley Pitt explores the role of companion animals in the lives of people experiencing poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand, highlighting the significance companion animals play in reducing social isolation and providing emotional support. Based on qualitative interviews with 28 participants (23 women and five men), the study reveals that companion animals offer a sense of security, friendship, and family inclusion, particularly for those living in rural areas. The research shows how participants often prioritised their animals' needs over their own, going without food or other essentials to care for their pets. The study also underscores the financial burden of pet ownership, including costs for food, veterinary care, and housing restrictions, which exacerbate the challenges faced by low-income individuals. The article calls for social workers to recognise the importance of companion animals in their assessments and interventions, suggesting that pets be included in support systems and household budgets. It advocates for policies that reduce pet care costs, such as free or low-cost veterinary services, and supports initiatives like the SPCA's desexing programmes. The study emphasises the need for anti-oppressive and critical social work practices to address the structural nature of poverty and its impact on both humans and companion animals.

Taken together, these two articles demonstrate how animals can play an important part in social work practice, and both argue for a more cohesive focus on the welfare of animals who are recognised by social workers as important to their clients and/or service users. Moving away from a focus on clients, the next article considers how animal-inclusive initiatives can affect social work practitioners. Laing's research brief for this issue considers the potential moral distress experienced by practitioners in the fields of family violence and housing where an interspecies lens is required because of the presence of vulnerable animals. Her article acknowledges the anthropocentric realities embedded within the emergency responses provided for those experiencing coercive control. Practitioner participants in this study talked about the institutional constraints on their ability to include animals within their practice responses, and the experience of moral distress that resulted. Resistance strategies (e.g., turning a blind eye to the presence of animals in accommodation) and the mobilisation of inter-species practice networks are mooted as viable pathways for change.

The next article moves from a focus on practising social workers to that of social work students**.** Helen Hickson, Kristy Kemp, Natasha Long, and Hayley Sherry explore the experiences and perspectives of a social work student placed at Flash Farm, a therapeutic farm in Victoria, Australia, offering animal-assisted social work. The placement involves students engaging in therapeutic activities with animals like horses, dogs, and goats aimed at improving clients' social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. The article, written from an autoethnographic perspective, highlights the alignment of various stakeholders' perspectives—university staff, field educators, and students—for a successful placement. It discusses pre-placement planning, the unique challenges and opportunities of animal-assisted social work, and the importance of integrating social work theories with animal-assisted interventions. The article also addresses the ethical considerations and the need for more explicit inclusion of animal-assisted social work in social work curricula. The students' experience at Flash Farm is detailed, emphasising hands-on learning, the importance of animal welfare, and the integration of social work principles in a non-traditional setting. Overall, it underscores the transformative potential of animal-assisted social work in social work practice and education. The article concludes with recommendations for successful animal-assisted social work placements, including the need for clear expectations, support from the placement team, and the inclusion of animal-related content in social work education.

In a similar vein, the next article also calls for an expansion of animal-inclusive social work by focussing on career and training opportunities that could usefully incorporate a more animal-centred aspect. Phil Arkow and Janet Joy-Gerlach argue there is a gap in social work knowledge and responsiveness when it comes to clients' relationships with companion animals. They refer to this as the People and Animals' Wellness and Safety (PAWS) gap. They propose the operationalisation of Recognition, Response and Referral (the '3 Rs') to incorporate companion-animal-inclusive awareness into social work. They then go on to outline nine different social-work-related career opportunities that offer opportunities to include companion animal awareness through the 3 Rs model. They call for an expanded definition of family and community that includes companion animals and point out that such a move, rather than challenging the epistemic base of the discipline, actually broadens it.

The next article changes focus slightly as David Betts and Annika Herb consider how animal-inclusive practices may benefit social work research processes. Betts and Herb point out that the qualitative research training given to emerging social workers overlooks the opportunities and significance offered by researcher/participant companion-animal dynamics. They reflect on their own research projects that included companion-animal interactions but did not, at the time of the research, focus on them. By re-analysing their data, mindful of these interactions, they demonstrate that companion animals offer ways to foster deeper connections in challenging, disconnected environments which, in turn, made it easier to engage with personal and/or sensitive research questions. This held true for them through in-person interviews, online interviews and online focus groups where the presence/discussion of animals contributed to group cohesion. Their analysis also showed that professional transcripts of research interactions often omit interaction with other animals—which not only reflects the humanism pervading social work but also removes data points that offer the chance of deeper analysis. They finish with a note of caution, arguing that while companion animals can be helpful to social work research, seeing them as research 'tools' is problematic and, in line with codes of ethics, they should be seen as sentient beings

who occupy a central place in family and social systems.

The next batch of articles expand upon some of the critiques offered in the previous works by moving towards more radical and detailed critiques of the current status quo vis-à-vis animals in social work. In the first, Angella Duvnjak explores the intersection of veganism, feminism, and social work through an autoethnographic approach. The author, a vegan social worker for over 20 years, reflects on her experiences within academia and the broader socio-political landscape of animal rights. Duvnjak critiques the marginalisation of animal justice within social work despite its core values of social justice. She recounts a specific incident at a university planning day, where she objected to pausing for the Melbourne Cup horse race. This moment of resistance highlights the tension between social work's ethical commitments and its implicit acceptance of normalised animal exploitation. Using a feminist intersectional lens, the article examines how discourses of 'othering' operate in academia, particularly around gender, power, and exclusion. The author discusses the challenges of being a 'disruptive' voice in an anthropocentric, neoliberal university system that resists radical inclusivity. Ultimately, Duvnjak argues for a broader, justice-oriented framework that includes animals within social work's ethical considerations. She positions veganism as a necessary expansion of social justice, advocating for greater recognition of animal oppression as interconnected with human injustices.

In a similarly personal reflection—this time of social work teaching—Jasmine Ferreira and Atsuko Matsuoka utilise the theoretical perspective of critical animal studies, which they outline as recognition that animals are not objects that exist for human use but are individual beings who have their own lives and inherent value, to present a challenge to social work education. Writing from a Canadian context, they suggest that the uptake of arguments for the inclusion of environmental justice within social work practice is not inclusive of non-human animals. This, they suggest, is particularly apparent within social work education. They use their Canadian teaching experience and a sound base of literature to offer both ontological and epistemological strategies to critique and to construct animal-inclusive social work education with an anti-oppressive foundation.

The next article is similarly positioned as a critique of existing anthropocentrism in social work but extends this to a consideration of 'wild' animals, in this case the much-maligned (in Aotearoa) brush-tailed possum. Emily Major asks what criteria do we use to determine whether an animal is considered a pest or not? How does this determination impact upon the means we use to remove those seen as pests? She suggests that measures of nativity (whether a species is native to a country or region), controllability (how feasible and economically viable it is to eradicate the animal), and worthiness (their perceived value to human beings) can assist us to move conservation education into a frame inclusive of compassion without cruelty. This, she argues, provides an environment in which children can optimally develop empathy. The article notes the anthropocentrism prevalent within social work that permits ongoing speciesism and especially the marginalisation of those species constructed as 'pests' and suggests that lenses of green social work and eco-feminist ethics of care can assist in the creation of an alternate way of knowing/seeing/treating animals routinely abused due to their status as 'pests'.

With a similar focus on the development of empathy in young people through their interactions with, and knowledge of, animals, the next article considers "Dogs Connect" as an example of a dogs-first wellbeing dog programme. Here, Erin Jones and Grant Shannon's article straddles the

conceptual divide between anthropocentric and deep ecological perspectives of the relationship between humans and non-human animals in the natural world. Locating the article within the "Dogs in Schools" programme in Australia, the authors explore the therapeutic benefits of animal-assisted interventions with children through structured encounters with dogs and suggest that outmoded methods of human interaction with dogs, akin to command and control, have contributed to the perception that such programmes favour humans over animals. Reframing the canine–human relationship, they suggest, is core to developing authentic communication and fostering empathetic growth in children. While the article makes mention of the relevance of this programme to social workers in schools, their suggestion of the need for regulatory guidelines in the use of animal-assisted interventions gives the article a wider reach for social workers.

Next up is another article that critiques the humanist base of social work and calls for a radical extension of social work considerations of other animals using intersectionality. One of the characteristics of this special issue is the range of theoretical perspectives adopted by authors and researchers in their coverage of animals and social work. Taylor and Fraser's article uses an intersectional feminist analysis to strongly argue that the feminist analysis of power cannot remain limited in application to humans, and that oppression of species is about the exercise of power over animals that cannot be ignored within a feminist lens. Whilst they acknowledge the progress made within social work to include consideration of animals in relation to (for instance) therapeutic relationship and intervention, and the influence of companion-animal relationships within fields such as family violence, trauma and disaster, the authors suggest that a feminist-informed social work lens needs also to consider our profession's stance on the extractive industries of meat, dairying and hunting, on animals' use by humans in research and testing, and humans' use of animals for entertainment. Intersectional feminism, they argue, compels us to consider these issues.

In the first of two Viewpoint articles Ksenija Napan shares a very personal reflection on dogs in her life 'Dogs: Teachers of what matters, in social work and in life. Napan provided personal, professional, and spiritual reflections on reverence for life, experienced through connection with animals. Her reflection links values and beliefs learned from associating with animals and with social work principles as outlined in Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Ethics.

We finish with a Viewpoint article that we think uses many of the ideas from the critical articles mentioned above to consider care farms. Kathryn Lelliott takes issue with care farms as they are currently conceived. She acknowledges that care farms might well be good for some human participants but asks, "How can anything involving slaughter be considered 'care'?" She argues that care farms are trapped in a romanticised, humanist, understanding of human–animal relations where farms are constructed as 'natural' places with happy animals. And she calls for a critical animal studies approach to care farms—one that recognises the inherent humanism of their current practices, and one that remains "cognisant that farming animals for slaughter is inherently violent and incompatible with a socially just and egalitarian world". She argues that empathy is a cornerstone of social work and that, to engender this, care farms must extend care and empathy to all sentient beings, not just to humans.

Taken together, we feel the articles in this edition showcase the breadth of practical and theoretical work being done addressing the place and 'use' of animals in social work. They encourage us to keep thinking about ways in which we might better recognise the human–animal bond to the benefit of

humans and animals alike, and they push us to (re)consider our epistemic prejudices so that we might include animals in social work in ways that draw attention to their dignity and rights to life beyond their utility to humans.

Editor's note

This issue also contains an invited commentary and two additional articles. In an invited commentary "Full of hope: Poverty, social work and social services in the world we live in" Mike O'Brien contributes to a conversation about what this means in the context of social services and social work and the possibilities for creative and constructive work in the current environment. In "Transition into social work practice: Experiences of Newly Qualified Māori Social Workers" Santana Williams (Ngāti Rangi; Ngāti Tuwharetoa) and Jeanette Hastie (Ngāti Ranginui) report on a study in which Māori graduates of the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata were invited to engage in one-to-one interviews. The study was underpinned by the values of Kaupapa Māori Research and highlights a cultural nuance of the graduates' first experiences of being an independent practitioner.

In the final full research article in this issue Christina Francis and PM Mathew provide insights from their qualitative study in "Family environment of children with specific learning disabilities: Implications of parent-mediated home interventions in family-centred social work practice." Francis and Mathew interviewed 10 mothers of children with specific learning disabilities belonging to special education centres and special schools in South Bengaluru, Karnataka, India. The authors conclude that aspects of cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance and caring, independence, active recreational orientation, organisation and control impact on the family environment and they emphasise the need for effective parent-mediated home interventions to improve family wellbeing.

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