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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

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.

Thank you to all who have worked on this large issue, the contributors, reviewers and both guest editors and the main journal team.

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Full of hope: Poverty, social work and social services in the world we live in

Mike O'Brien

ABSTRACT

Child poverty is a central consideration for social work in Aotearoa, affecting families and social service delivery and social work in many fields of practice. Working with individuals, whānau and communities to enable them to pursue their dreams and aspirations is central to social work. Although thwarted from time to time by neoliberal contractual requirements, the resilience of practitioners means that they can be full of hope about their work and the possibilities it holds as they work in resistance to those requirements. It is practice that means working for change at both an individual and systemic level.

Keywords: Child poverty, hope, aspirations, social services, social work practice

Introduction

"People say it's the disease and the hunger that's killing us, but I say it's the being poor" (Henry O'Toole [main character], in Huff, 2020).

While O'Toole is referring to poverty generally, his remark is equally apposite in relation to child and whānau/family poverty, a major focus for this article. (While I am focusing on child whānau/family poverty, I will use the term *child poverty* as an easier shorthand throughout this article). We begin with a brief discussion about child poverty in general and its incidence and prevalence in Aotearoa New Zealand; child and whānau/poverty is an appropriate place to focus because it is so central to many of the issues faced by social service users. From there, we proceed to a wider 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.

Child poverty

There is a vast national and international literature on poverty, especially, but certainly not exclusively, child and whānau poverty. That literature traverses, among other things, discussions and debates about both how best to measure poverty and what a definition should include and be based on. It is not necessary or appropriate to review those debates here. However, there is one significant core that runs extensively through the debates, namely that poverty encompasses a lack of resources (especially, but not exclusively, financial resources) to enable an individual and/or whānau to participate in and enjoy a standard of living regarded as acceptable in contemporary society. (Cheyne et al., 2008; Lister, 2004; Smeeding, 2009; and Townsend, 1993 discuss this much more extensively than is either possible or necessary here).

Reflections on social work practice and a range of work in the social work literature make it very clear that poverty is a central component underlying so much of the lives of users and the daily engagements and relationships for practitioners (Bradshaw, 2001; Daly & Kelly, 2015; Dowling, 1999; Krumer-Nevo, 2020; Parrott, 2014; Sheedy, 2013). Perhaps even more critically for practice and practitioners, the ANZASW

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Code of Ethics clearly identifies identifying “solutions to poverty” as a core part of the history of social work’s development, going on to note, under the heading “Our Professional Values and Ethical Principles”, that “we have a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are marginalised, vulnerable, oppressed or *living in poverty* [emphasis added]” (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019).

What do we know about poverty, more specifically, child poverty, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context? Probably the most substantial and influential work around poverty measurement in this country has been undertaken by Perry in his annual reports from the Ministry of Social Development. (See Perry, 2024 for the latest iteration.) His work draws extensively on a material hardship approach to poverty. That is, poverty is demonstrated by the lack of a range of possessions, resources and/or absence of amenities and opportunities regarded by New Zealanders as necessary to enable participation in contemporary New Zealand society. For example, children who have six or more of these items set out in Table 1 would be considered to be living in material hardship; this definition is one of the measures used by government in its annual report on child poverty.

Table 1. Material Hardship Items

Households and children
Income adequacy for basics
Used Foodbank/other community help
Borrowed for basics from family/friends
Can pay unexpected $500 essential bill
Delayed replace/repair appliances
Car
Holiday away each year
Dampness or mould
Can afford to keep home warm

Who are these children and families in Aotearoa New Zealand? The characteristics of the group living in poverty are reflected in Table 2. It is worth noting in this table that column 1 refers to the percentage of children in that group living in material hardship while column 3 refers to the percentage of children living in poverty. For example, 7% of children in two-parent households live below the poverty line, while of the group of children living in poverty, 37% live in a two-parent household.

Child-specific items in the 2018-19 Household Economic Survey and later surveys

Item No.	Item
Have/do, don’t have/do for each of your children (Respondents are asked whether any lacks are because of cost or for some other reason.)	**Economising :** not all, a little, a lot – to keep down costs to help in paying for (other) basic items (not just to be thrifty or to save for a trip or other non-essential)
Two pairs of shoes in a good condition that are suitable for daily activities	Postponed a child's visit to the doctor
Two sets of warm winter clothes	Postponed a child's visit to the dentist
Waterproof coat	Did not pick up a child's prescription
All the uniform required by their schools	Been unable to pay for a child to go on a school trip or other school event
A separate bed	Had to limit children’s involvement in sport
Fresh fruit and vegetables daily	Had your children go without music, dance, kapa haka, art, swimming or other special interest lessons
A meal with meat, fish or chicken (or vegetarian equivalent) each day	Had your children continue wearing shoes or clothes that were worn out or the wrong size

Source: Adapted from Perry (2024).

Table 2. Selected Key Characteristics of Children and Whānau Living in Poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand

	Rate (%)	Numbers	Composition (%)
ALL 0-17s	12	144,000	100
Household type			
Two-parent with any dep children	7	53,000	37
Sole-parent with any dep children	32	60,000	42
Other family HHs with any dep children	18	28,000	20
Main source of HH income			
Main source market	8	78,000	54
Main source government	39	66,000	46
HH work intensity			
2+ earner HH – 1+ FT	6	36,000	25
Sole-earner HH – FT	14	37,000	26
Part-time only	24	14,000	10
No earner (workless)	42	53,000	37
Self-employed	3	4,000	2
Ethnicity			
Māori	22	62,000	33
Pacific	29	45,000	23
Asian	4	8,000	4
European	9	70,000	37
Other	14	6,000	3

Source: Adapted from Perry (2024), Table 7.

As indicated in the earlier discussion, this description is based around a material hardship approach to, and measurement of, child poverty, one of the key components of the approached used by government in its annual report on child poverty indicators.

Recent work suggests that the number of children living in poverty are worsening. For example, the Ministry of Health (2024) report on the country's health shows that the numbers going without food has increased since the previous report with one in four children living in households where food ran out often, or sometimes, in the previous year. Concurrently, foodbanks are reporting greater pressure on their resources, requests for assistance coming from diverse groups, including those who had never previously sought assistance. Indeed, the pressure on one prominent foodbank in South Auckland has been such that it has decided to stop providing parcels.

Furthermore, Stats NZ (2024) has recently reported work on persistent poverty, one of the measures to be developed under the Child Poverty Reduction Act 2018. Its initial estimates are that one in 10 children live in persistent poverty, defined as being in a household below 60% of the median before housing cost income level in the current year and in 2 of the previous 3 years. While these are an estimate only at this stage, this would mean that approximately 120,000 children live in persistent poverty. As a third piece of

the recent picture, the "Growing Up in New Zealand" project has identified one in five of its sample experiencing material hardship at some stage in their first 12 years and one in 10 in their 12th year (Growing Up in New Zealand, 2024).

All of this occurs, of course, in an environment which is replete with significant (unnecessary and excessive) pressures, stresses and strains in a range of areas affecting social work practice, provision of social services and, even more significantly, the lives and opportunities for those individuals, whānau and communities with which social workers work. Recent media has been redolent with a range of stories, reports and articles around a host of issues of significance for both poverty and social services. These stories and reports have canvassed such critical issues as:

- attacks on Te Tiriti and on programmes linked to and embedded within te ao Māori;
- homelessness, increases in the numbers of the homeless and difficulties in accessing emergency housing
- increasing numbers of children in poverty and material hardship;
- cuts in contracts for social services across different settings;
- difficulties in accessing mental health services;
- a range of cuts and reductions in services for people with a disability and their whānau;
- boot camps for some youth justice offenders;
- cuts in the school lunch programme; growing use of foodbanks; and increased unemployment and tightened eligibility for benefit assistance and greater difficulty in accessing that assistance.

This list is by no means exhaustive but it is very substantial, in both its breadth and depth, and, as I have indicated, in its implications both for services and for those who work within and those who use those services. The recent Pakukore conference was subtitled "Poverty, by Design", reflecting an emphasis that the changes, consequences and directions indicated in the list above are not unfortunate by-products, but rather are the result of deliberate decisions about priorities and choices. While these priorities and choices (and the resultant outcomes) may seem some distance away from the daily demands of social work practice, clearly they are not because of the ways in which they impact on the lives, choices and opportunities (at multiple levels) faced on a daily basis by whānau, communities, social work staff and social service agencies.

Towards a hopeful future

While this started as a regular, standard article, the process of writing it and various interactions during that time led me in a slightly different direction. It is a direction which has led me to focus further on social work and social services and, second, to reflect more closely on the relations between social work practice and the role of the state. I have been lucky enough to have had a series of experiences in recent weeks which have provided both the opportunity for conversation and reflection and engagement with a quite diverse range of activities—the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Conference; another mahi tahi gathering with the Peter McKenzie project; Hikoi mo te Tirit;, the Pakukore : Poverty, by Design Conference—which have provided multiple stimuli, encouragement and challenges. Throughout these (and other related) experiences, I am left with hope, excitement and deep optimism about the prospects which lie ahead for social work practice and for the social services in which we are immersed.

The data on child poverty and the directions reflected in the list set out above make for grim reading and significant distress—both for those directly affected and for those who work with them. While tussling with the issues above (and many other significant ones) and acknowledging the difficult

climate in which we currently practise, I have been introduced to the work of Hilary Cottam (2018), whose book, *Radical Help: How We Can Remake the Relationships Between Us and Revolutionise the Welfare State,* explores many of the issues facing social and related services and challenges many of the assumptions made about delivery and provision of services. In her work, she sets out different examples or case studies around working with users (I dislike this word but don't have a ready alternative) in five areas: family life; youth work; unemployment and employment; and health and ageing.

At the risk of simplifying what is a thoughtful and provoking conversation, in these case studies she describes working with users in ways which make their needs and aspirations the centre of services. That is, users determine what is needed and how it can be most effectively provided. In the discussions about these examples, she strongly challenges the neoliberal and managerial basis on which so much of social service delivery occurs, in both the public and not-for-profit sector. In an argument which is familiar on a daily basis to social workers and those working in the social services, she emphasises the ways in which programmes and services are too often determined by a narrow output framework in which the work of agencies is driven by neoliberal contractual requirements. Hers is not a criticism of social workers and practitioners—quite the contrary. Rather, it is a criticism of the economic, political and ideological forces which shape and structure the work of agencies and the lives of those we work with. Her focus is on establishing and sustaining in depth relationships with users, relationships which closely engage with their dreams and aspirations. Importantly, it is these dreams and aspirations which then form and shape the ongoing social work and the associated and requisite relationships.

Enabling and supporting people to articulate and pursue their dreams, their hopes and plans for their future lives, is surely fundamental to social work practice and to the work that we do each and every day. It is captured in expressions such as "by Māori, for Māori", "Pacific led and delivered", "nothing about us without us" and is extended in Cottam's (2018) work to all of our practice. It is the organisational, ideological and contractual frameworks which make this, at best, difficult and at worst, impossible. Social work practice and social work and social service literature is clear that it is working alongside and with those dreams and aspirations that provide the daily motivation and work satisfaction and enjoyment that form the lifeblood and raison d'etre for the daily mahi of practitioners. Too often, practitioners find their work with those dreams and aspirations thwarted, as I have noted above, by the limited goals pursued by agencies as those agencies focus on outputs and contractual obligations.

Cottam's challenge to the welfare state services focuses heavily on the failures of the welfare state, as currently enacted, to meet human needs and on the opportunities and possibilities that arise when users are supported and enabled to pursue their dreams and aspirations. However, her work fails to articulate a clear position in relation to what the role of the state might be in facilitating and supporting local responses and local initiatives. She is certainly no supporter of the neoliberal, minimalist state. There is a critical role for the state in terms of such critical considerations as promoting and underwriting equity and protecting and promoting the interests of minority groups. The state has a vital role in both preventing poverty and providing adequate income to ensure that all children have the resources and opportunities they need and are able to pursue their dreams. The state has a crucial role, too, in ensuring that there is an adequate and equitable distribution of resources throughout the country so that individuals, whānau and communities have access to the appropriate services they need, wherever they live. As Cottam (2018) observed, too often the state, through its

various institutions and agencies, acts in ways which control and manage (rather than support and enable) human need and human wellbeing.

In the light and context of the range of issues and difficulties I have outlined above, what is it that leaves me with hope about the future for social work and social services, and more importantly for those whānau and communities with which we work? While, undoubtedly, there is much to be troubled about and much currently that is very disturbing, there is also strong cause to be quite optimistic and hopeful. The recent experiences I have referred to above demonstrated three things to me very clearly.

First, on a more general level, the hikoi and the work in many other settings clearly demonstrate that there is a powerful current that is moving us forward to a much better future in which tangata whenua and tangata tiriti will create and develop an Aotearoa that works for all of us. Second, there is a substantial group of rangatahi leaders (Māori and Pākeha) who are committed to a new and better Aotearoa. This group is both active and emerging on a number of fronts and across a range of dimensions with vision, passion, energy and empathy; they will create, and then sustain, a different and better social and economic order.

Third, and more directly of relevance for social work and the social services, in those experiences of the last few weeks which I have touched on above, there are many instances, stories and experiences demonstrating the qualities and practices referred to in Cottam's work and approach summarised earlier. These include careful and sustained work with people who are homeless, work with gangs, work with rangatahi and their whānau around offending and related issues, a range of projects engaging with rangatahi as they shape their futures, work with whānau in ways that support them to continue to care for their tamariki and mokopuna and provide them with opportunities to grow and develop, provision of foodbank services in ways that maximise the agency and autonomy of users and engage those users actively in decisions about the services. Social work practitioners often find themselves acting in ways that resist the organisational expectations and demands—the ANZASW conference provided wonderful illustrations of that resistance and of the resilience of practitioners as they worked with users in ways that provide meaningful support as users pursue their dreams, goals and aspirations. Similar themes and stories emerged at the *Pakukore: Poverty, By Design* conference.

As the social work literature and the social work code of ethics make clear, social work carries a dual mandate, namely to engage effectively with individuals, their whānau and communities *and* to work to change to social and economic environment in which those individuals, whānau and communities are located. This fundamental social justice remit is reflected in the *Ngā Tikanga Matatika Code of Ethics* values and ethical principles preamble: "Our Profession is … dedicated to the achievement of social justice for all", going on to say "we promote socially just policies, legislation and improved social conditions" (Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2019, 8 & 9). The green seeds of hope for change, of a brighter future, of resistance and resilience in the face of difficult circumstances were very strongly reflected in many of the brief examples I referred to above. It is a future full of hope, hope for the building of a better world so that all children have the opportunities and resources they need, hope for the future lives, dreams and possibilities for all those we work with, hope for the opportunities and support to pursue the high quality practice we all aspire to, hope that our collaborative and collective work with users and colleagues will build the socially just world that is embedded in social work.

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Horses supporting the social inclusion of young people with disabilities: A case study from Ireland

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) are recognised practices useful to enhance the social inclusion of people through interaction with nature and animals. Despite their perceived benefit, much of the preceding literature focuses on the limited evidence base for the impact of AAIs, due to a limited number of studies conducted with randomised control trials. The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme in Ireland, showcasing AAIs as a means of social inclusion.

METHODS: This article reports on one component from a PhD on nature-based interventions and the social inclusion of young people in precarious situations. The research was a qualitative, exploratory study involving participant observations of eight young people engaging in the programme, and one semi-structured interview with a programme participant. Reflexive thematic analysis was used to identify key themes.

FINDINGS: An analysis of the data identified four main themes: the importance of the human-animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses on the students; and, centring animal welfare in the programme.

CONCLUSION: This article advocates that social work and relevant disciplines can consider AAIs as innovative and beneficial for some young people engaged in their services, such as for the social inclusion of young people with disabilities. Additionally, this article suggests that, when centring animal welfare guidelines in these programmes, AAIs can also serve to protect the health and wellbeing of the non-human animal involved.

Keywords: Equine-assisted services, animal-assisted interventions, social inclusion, disability, vocational training programmes, animal welfare

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Introduction

The aim of this article is to present findings from a single case study taken from a broader, multi-case PhD project exploring nature-based interventions (NBIs) in Ireland supporting the social inclusion of young people in precarious situations. This case study explores the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme (ETP) in Ireland, showcasing animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) as a way towards social inclusion. This training programme takes the form of a nature-based vocational education and training (VET) initiative which is utilised to support the social inclusion of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities.

The research questions of the overall study are:

- How, if at all, do NBIs enhance the social inclusion and capabilities of young people in precarious situations?
- How does the nature element of NBIs contribute to enhancing young people's freedom to lead a life they have reason to value?
- What do the programmes do that gives the young people a reason to value them (or not)?

The data collection took place on site at Festina Lente, a registered charity who offer equine-assisted services (EAS), such as therapeutic horse riding, day service programmes and a mobile equine outreach programme, for people with additional needs, including physical, mental, developmental or intellectual disabilities, in County Wicklow, Ireland. The research participants were students in the Festina Lente's ETP, which is a 3-year, full-time VET programme and EAS for young people with disabilities. This programme supports the students to develop their knowledge, skills and competence in a broad range of equine skills, and successful graduates qualify to work in a variety of equine sectors through a formal Quality and Qualifications Ireland Level 4 Major Award in Horsemanship.

Initially, as a background to this study, the topics of social exclusion, VETs and NBIs, are explored. Then the research methodology and methods are discussed, and the context of the case study explained further. The research findings are presented as four major themes: human–animal bond; natural environment aiding learning; calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. These findings are discussed in relation to preceding theoretical work and empirical studies, and to the research aim and questions. The human-centred approach of this research aims to understand the experiences of the people taking part in the programmes as a result of their interactions with nature and more-than-humans; however, impacts on the non-human animal are also discussed. This article adds to the ongoing discourse on the ecosocial approach in social work, and specifically offers an alternative way for social workers to work in an interdisciplinary mode, with the help of the natural environment through NBIs, to support the social inclusion of young people with disabilities.

Background

Social exclusion experienced by people with disabilities

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (2006) defines people with disabilities as "those who have long-term physical, mental, intellectual or sensory impairments which in interaction with various barriers may hinder their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others" (p. 4). People with disabilities are at a higher risk of social exclusion, and within the European Union, the "widest absolute gap between the shares for people with and without a disability was in Ireland (39.3% for people with a disability compared with 14.6% for people with no disability)" (Eurostat, 2022). The Government of Ireland (1996) defined social exclusion as "cumulative marginalisation: from production (unemployment), from consumption (income poverty), from social networks (community, family and neighbours), from decision making and from an adequate quality of life" (p. 17). There is, therefore, the need for appropriate, long-lasting solutions to enhance the social inclusion of people with disabilities to support them to participate effectively and meaningfully in society.

Alternative education opportunities

VET initiatives can be considered as one option to support inclusion possibilities of participants by enhancing skill development

and personal development. The purpose of VET programmes is to provide education designed to aid individuals in securing employment and promote opportunities for people with a disability (Bartram & Cavanagh, 2019). This provision of education focuses on the specific knowledge and skills required to work within a particular occupation. The ETP at Festina Lente originated from this goal, to provide education for people with additional needs to achieve employment within the equestrian industry. Learning is intended to equip the participants with the theory and practical ability to acquire work upon completion of the course.

To support the securement of employment and success of the learner, this course emphasises a holistic view of education. Miller (2000) described holistic education as a "philosophy of education based on the premise that each person finds identity, meaning, and purpose in life through connections to the community, to the natural world, and to humanitarian values such as compassion and peace". The implementation of holistic learning is demonstrated in Festina Lente's mission statement outlining the goal to "empower people to achieve their personal best in the natural world of horses, horticulture and community" (Festina Lente, 2024). The ETP demonstrates the implementation of this concept by tailoring classes to the learners' style and pace whilst incorporating a rounded education. This means that learning is not solely based on academic knowledge but encourages the development of confidence, independence and other life skills which are key attributes to support the gaining of employment in the future. This further enhances the social inclusion possibilities of the programme participants.

Working with(in) nature

Social workers are increasingly incorporating the natural environment into our practice, education and research, and some are embracing an ecosocial approach (EA) in social work, which is a vital way to transform how we approach all social issues, structures and problems from a combined social and ecological lens (Matthies et al., 2001). The EA provides a holistic approach to social issues and recognises the interconnectedness between humans and the non-human natural world of plants, non-human animals, ecosystems, etc. (Matthies et al., 2001). This approach centres the natural environment in our promotion of wellbeing. The EA is maintained throughout the research process as an alternative approach to social change and mainstream social work which has been useful in combatting social exclusion (Turunen et al., 2001). This approach utilises different theoretical approaches which uphold social and environmental justice (Matthies et al., 2001). One example of ecosocial work in action which this article addresses is NBIs, and, more specifically, AAIs. These interventions are considered useful to enhance the social inclusion of people through interactions with nature and animals.

The VET programme offered at Festina Lente is a form of NBI that can offer a promising initiative to support the social inclusion of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities. As Shanahan et al. (2019) succinctly defined, NBIs are "programmes, activities or strategies that aim to engage people in nature–based experiences with the specific goal of achieving improved health and wellbeing" (p. 2). NBI is an umbrella term encompassing various transdisciplinary interventions, including AAIs. As defined by the International Association of Human-Animal Interaction Organizations (IAHAIO) (2018), AAIs are "a goal oriented and structured intervention that intentionally includes or incorporates animals in health, education and human services (e.g., social work) for the purpose of therapeutic gains in humans" (p. 5). Some examples of AAIs include visiting dog walking programmes, animals in the classroom, equine therapy, social farming, and animal-assisted pedagogy.

Within AAIs is a sub-field of horse and other equine related interventions, hereinafter referred to as equine-assisted services or EAS, which covers various services in which professionals incorporate horses and other equines as collaborators to benefit people; this consists of three broad areas: therapy; learning; and horsemanship (Wood et al., 2021). Within Ireland and internationally, the implementation and recognition of AAIs and EAS have become increasingly popular deriving from the need for these services and following the recognition of their potential benefits (Seery & Wells, 2024). Some of the popular types of EAS within Ireland include therapeutic horse riding, equine-assisted learning, and equine-facilitated psychotherapy.

The many potential benefits of NBIs, including AAIs and EAS, have been evidenced throughout research, such as improvements in physical, mental, social, emotional or spiritual health and wellbeing (Carlin et al., 2020; Shanahan et al., 2019; Silva et al., 2023); increasing self-esteem and enhancing social inclusion (Rogerson et al., 2019); and improving nature-connectedness (Sheffield & Lumber, 2019). Human–animal relationships can support our physical, emotional and psychological wellbeing by altering the chemicals in our bodies and brains (Kruger & Serpell, 2010). These benefits come from the sense of attachment to another being or attachment figure, allowing the human–animal bond to enhance social relatedness and belonging (Fine & Beck, 2019; Hauge et al., 2014). The benefits can also extend to the animals engaged in the service when their welfare and well-being are prioritised. The services provided by Festina Lente incorporate the five domains model by Mellor (2017), which assesses the nutrition; physical environment; health; behavioural interactions; and, overall mental state, of equines, therefore ensuring both their welfare and wellbeing. This theoretical model is designed to assess the welfare of the animal in a "systematic, structured, comprehensive and coherent" structure (Mellor, 2017, p. 6). This model of assessment takes a step further than welfare to wellbeing and creates an environment for improving the quality of life of the animal as opposed to simply meeting their basic needs.

The research which has been completed within Ireland has supported the growth of the EAS industry, outlining some of these services can offer effective, transferable and long-lasting benefits to participants (Heffernan, 2017). Despite these possible benefits, the evidence base for AAIs is limited due to a lack of well-designed studies using randomised controlled trials (Fine, 2011). The authors recommend more research on the topic, specifically exploring the effectiveness of AAIs for the social inclusion of young people with disabilities. For this reason, this research explores the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an equestrian training programme in Ireland, showcasing animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) as a means of social inclusion.

Research methodology and methods

This research took a qualitative approach to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perspectives of young people engaging in an NBI, and to explore how these programmes are carried out. This case study includes one semi-structured, individual interview with an ETP participant, and participant observations of eight young people engaging in the ETP, which took place over a one-week period in 2023, from May 8–12.

The research participants were recruited through purposive sampling to ensure richness of data from participants who have specific experience of the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2014). The researcher contacted Festina Lente directly by email to discuss the research project. Once the organisation had offered to take part in the research, a suitable group of participants (students from the ETP) were chosen based

on the research project's inclusion criteria, the type of activity, the time of year the programme operates, and the duration of the activity. The researcher had no prior relationship with the organisation chosen and there were no conflicts of interest identified. The criteria for participation were that the participants must be young people who self-identify as being in a precarious situation; and who are participating in the selected nature-based programme in Ireland. The key feature of precarity experienced by the research participants was that they have a disability and thus face social exclusion.

Prior to conducting the research, an information sheet written in everyday language was shared with potential participants, including a consent form and information on the processing of personal data (privacy policy). To make the research and recruitment process more accessible, the researcher also created a 4-minute video of themselves describing the research project in everyday language which was shared with Festina Lente and the ETP students. No additional support needs were identified as the potential participants conveyed their understanding of the research requirements. This recruitment process resulted in eight ETP students providing written consent to partake in the research project. The age range of the participants was between 17 and 24.

Observations

The observations were carried out by the researcher whose role was that of observer as participant, meaning the role of the researcher was known to all involved, and the researcher engaged in the activities alongside the participants being observed. The researcher became fully engaged in experiencing what the participants were experiencing, taking in-depth field notes on the environment, the people, hierarchical structures, language used, words spoken, activities experienced, and the researcher's responses, thoughts and feelings. The setting is like many horse-riding schools, with an indoor arena, large outdoor fields, horse stables, tack rooms and an office. On site is also a large walled garden and garden shop, and temporary structures (e.g., prefabs) which act as offices and classrooms for the ETP students. The week on site was varied, and some tasks under observation involved the researcher and students grooming and handling horses, taking part in theory lessons such as communications training and practical lessons such as horse-riding, having lunch together, and working on the yard such as mucking out stables and cleaning.

Interview

At the wish of one ETP participant, an in-person, semi-structured interview was conducted on-site at an outdoor location chosen by the interviewee. Open-ended, semi-structured questions were asked to allow the participant freedom to discuss topics that were meaningful to them in response to the questions. Although pre-determined questions were formulated in an interview schedule in keeping with the semi-structured approach, probes were used to allow the participants to expand on their own experiences (Marlow, 2011). Topics discussed in the interview included social inclusion, their subjective experience of the NBI, power relations, skill building, future goals and impact of the NBI on their life. The interview was audio recorded using a dictaphone and transcribed verbatim by a professional transcription service in Ireland.

Analysis

Verbatim transcriptions of the field notes and interview data were input into MAXQDA, a software program for qualitative and mixed method analysis. Data were elicited and themes identified using a deductive approach, meaning the research questions and theoretical background guided the data collection and analysis process (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Marlow, 2011); however, the themes that developed were sometimes more broadly related to the research questions,

due to allowing the perspectives of both the researcher and the research participants to influence the process. Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach was used to develop, analyse and interpret patterns across the data. The six phases of data analysis were: dataset familiarisation; data coding; initial theme generation; theme development and review; theme refining, defining and naming; and, writing up (Braun & Clarke, 2022). This was not a linear process, with the researcher going back and forth between different stages as needed.

Situating ourselves

The authors are people without disabilities who have no experience engaging in an NBI or VET as participants. We acknowledge that the research participants are experts by experience and we sought to uphold their views and voices as accurately as possible. At the time of this study, the researcher and first author was completing a PhD and employed at Bielefeld University, Germany as a doctoral researcher. Prior to conducting this research, they reflected on their own biases, their role as a researcher, power dynamics and the impact their presence would have on the group. The researcher worked in social work practice for a couple of years prior to becoming a researcher and takes an empowerment approach to working alongside people, and also spent many years horse-riding and working at stables, therefore felt comfortable handling and working with horses.

At the time of this study, the second author was completing a master's degree in Social Care Management and was employed full-time by Festina Lente as yard manager, therefore, working closely daily with the students in the ETP programme. The potential bias arising from the second author working at the intervention being studied was minimised as they did not play a role in the research process, meaning they did not collect, analyse or interpret the data. The second author was invited by the researcher to co-author this article, after the findings of the data analysis had been interpreted, due to their practice-based knowledge of the programme and also their experience with animal welfare. Both authors practised reflexivity throughout the research and writing process to reflect on the impact of their own worldviews, biases, positioning and values on their understanding and interpretation of the findings.

Ethics

Data collection commenced following ethical approval, granted by the Ethics Committee of Bielefeld University. To minimise harm to the participants who were not experienced in participating with research, the researcher upheld rights-based and social justice theories of ethics throughout the research process. These theories of ethics centre the principles of treating people with dignity and respect, avoiding harm, and amplifying the voices of the least advantaged groups to redress inequality (Rawls, 1971; Simons, 2006).

Findings and discussion

The purpose of this research is to explore the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an ETP in Ireland, showcasing AAIs as a means of social inclusion. Thematic analysis of the data identified four major themes: the human–animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. Pseudonyms have replaced the names of the research participants to uphold privacy and confidentiality.

Human–animal bond

A close bond between the students and horses was observed and discussed by the students. This bond can support human wellbeing, social relatedness and a sense of belonging. This is especially important for the young people with disabilities to increase their social inclusion by having the opportunity to engage in meaningful relationships which can be both modelled by, and experienced with, horses.

Some students reported a connection to animals before their engagement in the programme, like Cassidy who shared, "I have 32 horses and two dogs at home." For others, this connection was fostered during their time in the programme. When observing the students working on the yard:

> [I]t was clear that each student had their favourite horse. Some students were keen to introduce me to their favourite horse and I encouraged them to tell me about the characteristics of the horse. David seemed to speak about the horse like a best friend, and he was often physically close and touching the horse throughout his interactions. (Field notes)

The students often affectionately spoke of the horses, such as Cassidy saying, "I love riding. Riding Fred. He's my baby."

Forming a connection to the animals was encouraged by the staff, for example:

> [W]hen getting horses from the fields to bring back to the yard, the students were asked by the staff which they wanted to take or who their favourite was. The students always had a horse in mind that they wanted to connect with that day. Josh said he always asks to take Jelly [a horse]. (Field notes)

Also, at the beginning of a group horse-riding lesson, the teacher "encouraged the students to talk to the horses and use their voice. He empowered the students to connect with their horses one-on-one and to build a relationship with them" (Field notes).

These findings support evidence of the human-animal bond and attachment theory. In the context of mental health support, Serpell et al. (2017) situated the animal as a co-therapist that offers an additional relational model. Latella and Abrams (2019) explained this more specifically in the EAS setting, describing horses as capable of perceiving, responding to and learning from their environment, which aids their therapeutic skills and educational abilities. This is important for the research participants as they engage in the ETP to gain skills and enhance their employability in the future. Physical connection with an animal can activate the oxytocin system and reduce cortisol levels (Handlin et al., 2011), and enhance feelings of intimacy and perceived social support, which was also observed in this study (Beetz, 2017; Hauge et al., 2014). These health and wellbeing benefits that derive from a physical and emotional connection to the horse can support the students to lead a life they have reason to value by considering the horse as an attachment figure and a relational and social model to aid their social inclusion.

Natural environment aiding learning

In this programme, the students often work and learn outside in nature. The Victorian walled gardens act as a beautiful outdoor classroom, useful for attention restoration. The large fields are also a natural setting for the students to learn about horse behaviour and wellbeing, and the skills required to work in the industry in the future. As these students may experience barriers to learning in more traditional environments, like school, due to their disabilities, the benefits of the natural environment here are very important for capability building, skill development and social inclusion.

Throughout the ETP, the students attend a variety of lessons, including some theory lessons held both in an indoor classroom, and outside on the yard. The students shared that they "prefer being on the yard all day than days with indoor lessons" (Field notes). On the second day of observations:

> [T]he afternoon class was out on the yard. Students appeared to respond much better learning outdoors than this morning's indoor class. Students appeared more focused. There were more physical outlets and students had

> the ability to move around to expend their energy. This physical release was encouraged by the teacher. (Field notes)

On the third day of observations, the afternoon class was:

> [T]aken by the teacher out in the garden. The surroundings were very peaceful, with lots of grass, flowers, trees and the sound of trickling water from a nearby pond. There were other people with disabilities working in the gardens or enjoying them. The students were asked by the teacher if they prefer learning indoors or outdoors. The students said it depends on the weather but usually outdoors, even in the rain if they can go under a shelter. There were lots of small breaks during this lesson for one student with ADHD so he could go for short walks and release his energy without disrupting the group. Zach said he needed this to get rid of his energy. (Field notes)

The natural setting allows the students more freedom and flexibility to engage in a holistic education that is tailored to the students' style and pace, while incorporating a connection to the natural world.

This theme broadly supports the findings of other studies in this area linking the natural environment with enhanced learning outcomes. Burgon (2013) emphasised that the natural environment is a therapeutic process of equine-assisted learning, which is a major theme identified in their research. Nature as a background to activities and as a place for learning is presented by Wals (1994) as a fun and friendly environment where students can explore and learn more freely. Additionally, cognitive functioning can increase through immersion in nature (Atchley et al., 2012) which was evident when reviewing these field notes recorded on the same day: "the students are barely engaging with the teacher in this indoor class and their energy levels are very low" versus "the students are very eager to learn now, asking lots of questions [during an outdoor lesson] and seem more interested than this morning" (Field notes).

Previous scholars have also noted theoretically and empirically that nature can act as a restorative environment that supports wellbeing (Hauge et al., 2014; Kaplan, 1995; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). Time spent in the natural environment has been shown to mitigate and prevent stress by way of attention restoration (Kaplan, 1995). Time spent learning outdoors in a natural environment can reduce impulsivity and inattention, allows for risk-taking, collaboration and conflict resolution, and therefore can enhance learning capabilities (Mann et al., 2021). As Kaplan and Kaplan (1989) put it, "nature can be inspiring, awesome, tranquil or calming" (p. 175). This shows that the outdoor setting of this, and many other NBIs, is an important part of the experience (Hauge et al., 2014; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). This natural setting adds to the experience and can support the students to gain a holistic education to enhance their social inclusion and gives the students a reason to value the programme.

Calming effect of horses

The students experienced a calming effect when in the company of the horses, exhibiting fewer strong emotions, softer voices, more focus and fewer impulsive, fast movements than when the horses were not around. This impacted their experiences in the programme and can also have an impact on their life outside of the programme as they may experience reduced stress, increased social and physiological support, relaxation and increased wellbeing. This contributes to the value of the programmes for the young people.

When observing the behaviour of the students around the horses during a group horse-riding lesson on day three,

> [T]he students approached their horses very calmly and used quiet voices to talk individually to their horses. These calm interactions I observed lasted for the duration of the one-hour lesson. The students seemed confident and calm during this lesson and I noticed a visible difference in the energy level of the students compared to when they are working on the yard or in the classroom. The atmosphere was light and serene. (Field notes)

These findings are consistent with previous studies that discuss E. O. Wilson's (1984) biophilia hypothesis as a possible explanation for the calming effect of animals on humans (Beetz, 2017; Kruger & Serpell, 2010). Animals have been found to be capable of immediately destressing, de-arousing, relaxing and providing social and physiological support to humans (Beetz, 2017; Jung, 2022). This is due to our genetic and innate desire to attend to, and be attracted by, other living beings, observed as biophilia (Wilson, 1984). These are important for the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of the students.

In a similar setting to this study, Burgon (2013) also found a major theme related to calmness induced by horses. Latella and Abrams (2019) corroborated these findings in the context of equine-facilitated learning by highlighting previous studies demonstrating the calming effect of horses such as decreased inattention and distractibility. This is also confirmed by Jung (2022) who describes horses as having a large, gentle presence which can be therapeutically beneficial. When Zach's energy was making it difficult for him to focus or to engage in a task, "the group had a saying: 'What would Beau do?' Beau is a horse on the yard known for her calming energy. I heard the students repeat this throughout my time there" when they felt they needed to calm down or become focused: "*The students appear humbled in the presence of the horses*" which presented as being more reflective and respectful of the horses (Field notes). Although the longevity of these positive effects is under-researched, even a short-term reduction in stress can support wellbeing. It is important to note, however, that, although the participants in this and other studies have reported a calming effect around animals, the role of culture and individual experience are very important determinants of how AAIs can impact an individual, and these effects are not generalisable (Blazina et al., 2011; Jegatheesan, 2019; Kruger & Serpell, 2010). To address the hesitation or fear that some individuals may face when interacting with animals, a culturally responsive framework, such as that presented by Jegatheesan (2019) is vital for professionals who wish to incorporate AAIs into their work.

Centring animal welfare

When considering working with animal partners for human benefits, centring animal welfare and wellbeing is paramount. Modelling this core value in the programme and the organisation is very important to ensure the students are well equipped and skilled to work with horses appropriately in the future.

"The students have theoretical lessons throughout the 3-year programme, some of which focus on animal welfare" (Field notes). Animal welfare is considered a multi-dimensional concept which refers to an animal's ability to cope with their environment in both a physiological and mental context (Broom, 1986). Equine welfare and wellbeing are at the core of the EAS provision within Festina Lente. "There are posters around the site that emphasise their focus on promoting horse welfare standards" (Field notes). The understanding that welfare is crucial and is an ongoing and evolving journey is the foundation of the organisation's equine welfare policy and code of ethics for equines.

"The staff have professional backgrounds working with horses and view them as a partner animal" (Field notes). The staff also

prioritise a more-than-human benefit to their services. "The horses' well-being is paramount. Some of the horses on site are not working horses, they stay at Festina Lente even when they retire. There are also horses that are taking a break from work and live out in the fields" (Field notes). However, the foundation of AAIs has ordinarily been constructed and gauged from "What can animals do for us?" (Hatch, 2007). Thus, research within this field has noted that the animal partners are often side-lined as subordinate compared to the human participant (Gorman, 2019).

Research has progressively evidenced that the factors of environment and human-animal interactions can have a considerable impact on the welfare and wellbeing of the animal encompassing both positive and negative experiences (Mellor et al., 2020). AAIs should be considered in relation to advantages and disadvantages to both the humans and animals involved, as it is key that the benefits for humans do not offset the welfare of the animal (Glenk, 2017). As Claire remarked, "we use Troy [a mechanical horse] to learn how to ride before we can ride a real horse so that we don't hurt the horse" (Field notes). As Dawkins (2006) wrote, "real respect for animals will come when we see them as sentient beings in their own right, with their own views and opinions, their own likes and dislikes. The animal voice should be heard" (p. 9). This aspect of the students' learning is crucial to ensure they graduate from the course and to increase their capabilities to work with horses in the future.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the results are not generalisable due to the small sample size. The participants do not represent everyone engaged in an NBI or VET, or everyone facing social exclusion in Ireland. Each participant is individual, and it was precisely these individual experiences this research was aiming to understand. Another limitation of the study is the short period of time this programme was studied as it was not a longitudinal study. Future research could replicate this study across various AAIs involving young people with disabilities using a larger sample size and longitudinal data-collection methods to explore and compare the results of a variety of interventions over time. Another limitation is that only the ETP students were observed and interviewed, and the voices and opinions of the staff were not sought. This limits the ability to compare more general views on the programme, and to gain a broader understanding of how the NBI operates and what it aims to achieve. This was intentional, however, as the research was specifically looking to understand how the NBIs impact the young people involved from their perspectives. Finally, as the authors of this article are people without a disability, it would be more appropriate for people with a disability to explore this research topic. However, the research conducted incorporates the ethos of conducting research *with* people versus *on* them (Ashby, 2011). This is evident as the individuals' voices being at the centre of the research thereby best supporting the young people with disabilities to represent themselves in the research process.

Conclusion

This case study has explored the experiences of young people with disabilities engaging in an ETP in Ireland, showcasing AAIs as a way towards social inclusion. The article began with an introduction to the topics of social exclusion, VET programmes, and NBIs, defining important terms and providing a foundational argument for the safe and ethical inclusion of animals in some social work practice for the benefit of people facing social exclusion—however, not at the expense of the welfare of the animal. Animals should not be viewed as passive tools to be used during interventions, but rather as active collaborators and animal partners in the therapeutic process. The

authors recommend that animal welfare should be central to AAIs to protect the health and wellbeing of the non-human animal involved. The research methodology and methods were then presented in relation to how the data were collected and analysed, before moving onto the findings and discussion of the themes identified.

As mentioned previously, the evidence base for the effectiveness of AAIs is limited, but growing. However, "if people focus only on the outcomes, they will miss the brilliance of the process. The magic within these interventions is found in the daily actions that are at the heart of animal-assisted interventions" (Fine, 2011, p. 134). The themes identified in this case study showcase some of this magic: the human–animal bond; the natural environment aiding learning; the calming effect of horses; and centring animal welfare. These themes are connected to the research questions connecting NBI involvement with social inclusion, capability enhancement and leading valuable lives. This article argues that NBIs have the potential to support the health, wellbeing and social inclusion of participants, as evidenced in previous literature and in the findings of this case study.

Adding to the current discourse on the ecosocial approach in social work, this case study showcases an alternative way for social workers to work with the help of the natural environment through NBIs. Implications for social work include: (i) integrating more-than-human aspects into practice; (ii) engaging in the safe and ethical inclusion of non-human animals into social work for reciprocal benefits to human and more-than-human wellbeing; and, (iii) extending practice contexts into natural environments where service users can benefit from the therapeutic natural setting. The authors assert that social work and relevant disciplines can consider AAIs and VETs as innovative and beneficial for the social inclusion of some young people with disabilities engaged in their services. These interventions can support participants to contribute effectively and meaningfully in society by improving their health and wellbeing, and enhancing relations providing a beneficial learning environment in and with nature.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

She likes animals: The construction of veganism, a feminist analysis

Dr Angella Duvnjak – Independent Scholar

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article explores the changes witnessed in the socio-cultural and political landscape related to animal rights/animal justice/animal liberation movements and provides a critical analysis of the notion that the topic of animals in social work is somehow a peripheral or fringe issue.

APPROACH: An autoethnographic approach is employed to examine the construction of veganism and animal justice/liberation within social work. The author reflects on her own personal journey as a vegan for more than 30 years and a vegan social worker for the past 20 years.

CONCLUSIONS: Using a narrative drawn from the author's own experience and informed by a critical intersectional feminist approach, this article uses key moments of tension, disruption, marginalisation or expansion as a vegan social worker within academia to explore how various discourses of 'othering' contribute to areas of both acceptance and resistance within social work toward inclusion of consideration of animals.

Keywords: Feminist, vegan, social work, social justice, autoethnography

This article will use autoethnography as a research method to explore my personal experiences as a vegan social work academic. It will examine the narrative of an event that took place while employed as a social work academic in Australia several years ago. The narrative is drawn from journal entries and notes taken at the time of the events. I use a feminist intersectional approach to assist me in identifying the multiple meanings, positionalities and discourses contained within my experiences. I situate my analysis within the broader social context of the construction of various identities such as that of vegan, academic, social worker and woman. The narrative example takes as its focus an interaction at a university social work planning day around the suitability of observing Melbourne Cup horse race "festivities". I have come to view this event as an example of how the consideration of animals within social work encounters both inclusion/expansion and resistance responses related to factors such as the neoliberal university context, broader social discourses and events and the relative alignment with feminist and other critical and intersectional orientations of both individual social workers and the teaching school within which they are located. My examination of this event alongside my own social work journey within academia also serves as a vehicle for exploring the terrain of insider/outsider status, marginalisation, assumptions, and dominant norms within academia and how these intersect with other aspects of my life as a vegan for more than 30 years. Themes of gender, power, exclusion, and difference will be explored using a feminist lens as I reflect on the role of animals and social justice in social work.

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Feminist autoethnography as research method

I had intended to start with a "confession" of sorts, which is to say that this is the first time I have explicitly deployed an autoethnographical approach in my research or writing. And yet this is not strictly true. I have published on this topic previously (Duvnjak, 2011) where I used parts of my personal story yet the data or content being researched was not focused on my own experiences. Autoethnography differs in that it specifically allows for the author's lived experience or personal story to become the central data to be analysed (Ettore, 2017). If I reflect on the way I have inhabited the social work academic space over the years, as any of my colleagues and students could attest, I have always utilised a reflexive approach toward understanding and incorporating my personal experience in understanding social context and vice versa. Despite (or perhaps because of) my exposure to the "rigours" of positivist university research environments, feminist epistemology has always provided a helpful corrective to the institutional preference for the "abstracted objective" scholar. Feminist approaches foreground subjectivities and draw attention to the critical role that lived experience has in the production of knowledge. A feminist turning the lens toward oneself in the form of autoethnography is yet another invocation of the feminist tenet that "the personal is political" (Ettore, 2023). Sara Crawley contends that "feminist theory's greatest contribution to knowledge is an epistemological shift away from androcentric boundary specific methods that enforce traditional binaries – rational over emotional, authoritative voices over voices of the oppressed, public over private, transcendental truths over everyday experiences" (2012, cited in Ettore, 2017, p. 367).

As Witkin highlights, ethnography is not about identifying a "truth" but rather "enriching understanding" (2014, p. 4). Witkin explains that:

> [F]or autoethnographers, not only is the story itself generative of 'truths', but truth in the modernist sense is not the aim of inquiry. Rather, autoethnographic inquiry seeks to enrich our understandings, expand our awareness, increase our sensitivities, and provide insights that can lead to practical action. (2014, p. 10)

Witkin went on to argue that there exists a synergy between the social work orientation toward understanding behaviour within the social context and autoethnography, observing that "social workers understand that self/cultural narratives are inseparable" (2014, p. 7). Witkins suggested that:

> [F]or social workers, autoethnography provides a form of inquiry congruent with the values and commitments of the profession. There is no pretense of neutrality but an exploration of how we construct and represent realities in particular contexts while at the same time knowing that any telling will be partial and subject to revision. (2014, p. 12)

For feminists, the focus is also more explicitly on drawing attention to gendered power relations and the (re)production of inequality. Feminist autoethnography is "a method of being, knowing and doing that combines two concerns: telling the stories of those who are marginalized and making good use of our experience" (Allen & Piercy, 2005, p. 156). The question of how to make "good use of one's experience" is especially motivating for me as I find myself reflecting on the personal and the professional intersections of my identity as a vegan feminist social worker working within the university context over many years.

As other feminists have done, I attempt here to use autoethnography as a way of "making sense" of past work experiences (Ettore, 2023; Newcomb et al., 2023). Here I focus on only one part of my work experience as a social worker, within the

Australian university context over the past 15 years. This context has its own culture, its own "rules" and is governed by an ever-increasing neoliberal corporate imperative (Sims, 2020). Universities also have a legacy of exclusion that is gradually being eroded on several fronts, yet this is an incomplete project. The discipline of social work, due to its explicit social justice values base, is in many ways located at the crossroads of some of the more urgent debates in this space (Feldman, 2023; Herrero & Charnley, 2021; McKenzie & Khan, 2023). A critically reflexive feminist autoethnography provides a means of connecting "one's personal experiences and beliefs to professional and political processes" (Mitchell, 2023, p. 235). It can be usefully applied as a way of understanding the intersectional experiences of women within the academy and in particular how this helps to make sense of our professional and political selves (Allen, 2023; Newcomb et al., 2023).

Autoethnography inevitably shines a light on the researcher's emotions and interior world. Feelings and responses that have multiple, sometimes not always obvious or knowable, sources despite the best of attempts to *locate* and *ground* within the social, political and personal context of the events. As Witkin observes:

> There is an element of courage in many autoethnographies. To write autoethnography is to go public with aspects or events in one's own life; to reveal thoughts, feelings, and actions that may not be flattering to the author nor known to others. It is to transgress the conventional boundaries of the personal and professional in the interest of generating insight and understanding. (2014, p. 9)

Ultimately, it is a form of exposure that can be uncomfortable for both the writer and (often) the reader (Ettore, 2023; Tolich, 2010). Here I wish to acknowledge that the narrative I share is a re-telling and analysis from the perspective of one participant. To preserve anonymity, I have edited the narrative to remove any identifying information other than to say that it took place while working in a social work department in an Australian university in the last 15 years.

Positionality and feminist autoethnography

Locating oneself, identifying one's *positionality* or *standpoint* is central to intersectional feminist approaches. Originating as a response to positivist, westerns claim to "neutral" knowledge production, positionality or standpoint theory draws attention to the role social, historical and cultural privilege play in epistemology (Crenshaw, 1991; Harding, 2001; Lykke, 2010). One's social positioning is the vantage point from which we come to know the world and it is also how the world comes to know us in ways determined by unequal power relations inscribed along the lines of class, race, culture, sexuality and gender. For intersectional feminists, drawing attention to one's positionality is also an important political act in the face of dominant discourses that work to obscure the influence of social location and lived experiences of oppressed or marginalised "others".

This article foregrounds the vegan feminist social worker aspects of my identity and yet this sits alongside other identities and positionalities I have navigated. While this article takes, as its focus, events within the social work academic world, this cannot be disconnected or separate from my personal history navigating the world with various identities and experiences. For this reason, I plan to highlight some personal histories that shape my interactions with the world, particularly in relation to the dominant power structures within the university. These formative experiences and identity markers have come together to create interwoven aspects both of who I am, how I see myself,

who I am seen to be and how I navigate the world.

Breaching the borders: A vegan feminist social work journey

I am a white woman of Irish Australian/Serbian heritage from a working-class background. I was the first in my family to attend university. Both my mother and father worked in factories when I was born, and I grew up with the constant absence of one or other of them as they tag teamed for being home when the other was working. My mum later worked night shifts as a cleaner at the local public hospital, I didn't see too much of her after school. My father spoke little to no English when he arrived in the wave of so called "new Australian" migration that "built Australia" in the 1960s and 1970s. Growing up in Australia as a working-class girl with a parent from a "non-English-speaking" background during the 1970s and 1980s contributed toward a growing awareness of notions of difference, inclusion and exclusion.

I have a "funny" surname, I am told. I am told this often. The borders of the "norm" being highlighted and reinforced. You learn to pick up the clues in everyday interactions. They range from the slight (or extended) pauses before saying my name to the more obvious and explicit "oh your name is *very difficult*, isn't it?" comment. I am greeted this way on my first day in a new academic social work position a few years back by my then supervisor. I am being introduced to my predominantly white/anglo colleagues. They follow it up with an exasperated "I won't even *attempt* to say your name". I'm used to it. I am familiar with this dance. I smooth it over. I laugh. I rush in to solve the "problem" by normalising the comment with a quick "yes, it is a bit tricky...".

I began my training as a social worker just over 20 years ago in Australia. When I commenced, there was little to no mention of animals in the curriculum nor in the field except for maybe the beginnings of conversations around "assistance" animals. By the time I enrolled in my postgraduate social work degree after completing an honours degree in politics, I had already developed a firm conviction based on my feminist beliefs that the "personal was political". I had been vegan for over 10 years before entering social work and I had a growing awareness of the intersectional nature of oppression, something that informed my career choice. At that time, I can safely say I was somewhat of a lone voice wanting to talk about animals and social work in my cohort or with my lecturers. It would be rare that I would mention my thoughts on the connections between the treatment of animals and that of humans or the role that compassion or empathy for animals might have in assisting social work in developing a more holistic social justice lens. When I did, the response was usually dismissive or minimising in some way. The most common response was usually "admiration" for my stance but, of course, with the caveat that as "important" as it was, this issue did not rightly belong in social work. The dominant view was that it was just not a serious topic to be considered by professional social workers. Another common reaction was to be "admired" for being so *caring*, *sensitive* or *emotional* about animals. Most vegans will be familiar with versions of these kinds of responses, both of which serve to silence or contain the powerful critique of speciesism and anthropocentrism that is made explicit by the presence of a vegan. Another layer to this is the gendered connotations of reducing the vegan perspective to one of emotion. Gendered constructions of the inferior nature of caring and emotionality have been long observed by many feminist writers (Donovan, 2006; Held, 2006; Keller & Kittay, 2017). Indeed, gendered assumptions about care also inform mainstream views of veganism and the animal rights movement which is dominated by women (Donovan & Adams, 2007; Duvnjak, 2011; Gaarder, 2011a; Kemmerer, 2011). A privileging of

the rational, reasonable and detached was to be found even within social work, a caring profession, but one also intent on ensuring that the profession was taken as seriously as other allied health professions (van Heugten, 2011). The gendered and speciesist parameters of care and justice have been reinforced in subtle and explicit ways throughout my training.

As a vegan feminist, the personal has always been political and indeed my life work choices have seen me interweave my personal political commitments with areas of focus such as domestic and family violence, substance use and human–animal relations. Gender has always been part of the vegan experience. Somewhere near 80% of vegans in the western context are women (Gaarder, 2011b). The relationship between the construction of women, gender and animals has been extensively studied, drawing attention to the mutually reinforcing aspects of sexism and speciesism (Adams & Donovan, 1995; Duvnjak, 2011; Gaarder, 2011b; Kemmerer, 2011). Social work is also dominated by women and many of us who came to this profession did so as a natural progression of making links between our personal and political commitments (Couturier et al., 2022; Hill & Laredo, 2020). Yet I quickly realised that my personal political commitments around veganism did not intersect well with the "legitimate" borders of my chosen profession. I began a process of navigating the outsider status of my veganism utilising *trojan horse* tactics usually via my feminism. In other words, early on, I snuck it in.

This has changed in recent years. In the courses I teach—ethics, theory, domestic and family violence—I routinely and explicitly refer to animals and draw attention to the linked oppression between species. Often though, I am the only person within my school introducing such content and I cannot be assured that it remains when I have moved on to another university. I have witnessed an explosion of interest in the academic world on topics related to veganism and indeed this special issue is evidence of this. Despite this, it can be observed that social work has made slow progress toward meaningful inclusion of animals (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023, Gray & Coates, 2012; Hanrahan, 2014).

The vegan 'boom'?

Veganism and more specifically *plant-based* foods have become increasingly mainstream, surging in popularity in recent years (Budger, 2017; Buttney & Kinefichi, 2020; Doyle, 2016). Unlike when I first become vegan, the term is generally well understood and many more food options are readily available. I am no longer the "lone vegan" in workplaces and this shift has translated into "accommodations" and "adjustments" that I would never have envisaged when I first became vegan over 30 years ago. Veganism worldwide, however, remains low with estimates ranging from between 2 to 5% depending on the country (Mathieu & Richie, 2022; Vegan Society, 2024). Some argue that the increased popularity of plant-based diets across the western world has not translated to a significant increase in interest in veganism or animal rights (Quinn & Westwood, 2018).

Despite, or perhaps because of, the above shifts, stigma and negative stereotypes and perceptions of vegans as "extreme", "radical" or "aggressive" persist (Buttney & Kinefichi, 2020; Sorenson, 2011). "Veganphobia" is often (re)produced in mainstream media depictions of vegans (Cole & Morgan, 2011). Research has pointed to increased negative perception of vegans who are perceived to be motivated more by animal rights than say, environmental or health reasons (Markowski & Roxburgh, 2019; McInnis & Hodgson, 2017). In some ways it can be argued that the surge in mainstream popularity of plant-based veganism, understood as merely a dietary preference, has obscured the social justice and ethical critique that veganism offers (Doyle, 2016).

The recent cultural phenomenon of plant-based diets has reinforced a false ethical and moral equivalence where vegan and plant-based have become interchangeable with both constructed as about food or a diet. Indeed, to be vegan is to avoid animal products in one's diet. The original vegan society definition states that veganism is "*a way of living* [emphasis added] that seeks to exclude—as far as is possible and practical—all forms of exploitation of, and cruelty to, animals for food, clothing *or any other purpose*" (The Vegan Society (1979) 2024). Veganism encompasses a critique of anthropocentric and speciesist social structures and argues for social justice in its most expansive and inclusive form. That is, for all beings. This takes us way beyond the plate or dietary choices (while acknowledging the crucial role that this plays). Indeed, *veganism* and animal rights have been coined the "social justice issue of our times" intersecting with other social justice movements (Animal Justice Party, 2024; Brueck, 2017; Kemmerer, 2011; Singer, 2024).

'The race which stops the … planning day' – A vegan voice of dissent at the social work planning day

I now turn to explore a narrative drawn from my own journal entries and notes made shortly after an event some years back at a school of social work planning day at an Australian university where I was employed. For international readers it is worth noting that the Melbourne Cup is a horse racing event that attracts widespread national interest and is often referred to colloquially as the "race which stops a nation". It is observed as a public holiday in the state of Victoria in Australia but, across the nation, many workplaces hold events to celebrate the running of the race. Such events often involve a workplace sweep and such practices are widely supported. In recent years, however, spearheaded by the Coalition for the Protection of Racehorses (2024), a vocal minority voice standing against the race has emerged critiquing cruelty to horses, gambling, alcohol abuse and the relationship between the event and increased reports of violence against women (Forsdike et al., 2022; Lloyd et al., 2013; Markwell et al., 2017; Wilson et al., 2021).

> I can feel that familiar and uncomfortable feeling rising within me that something is not right. Something is not aligned or is 'amiss' somehow. What is it? What is going wrong here?
>
> It's the annual social work planning day for social work staff at the university I am employed at. I have been in my role for a few years at this point. I love my job. If I be honest this is notable and rare. It's not always been easy to find my 'place' within the system so to speak. While this school, in common with previous schools I have worked in at other universities, lacks cultural diversity, there is a good mix of people most of whom seem to be dedicated to the job of educating the next generation of social worker professionals with a firm focus on social justice and ethics. Of course, things have been challenging on several fronts as the university sector moves ever steadily in the direction of corporate vocational style education but many of us remain 'true believers' in the purpose of social work and the inherent value of a university education. Throughout my time in this role, I have been seen to champion issues related to animals. I have supervised a student master's thesis on the topic, I have incorporated some of my knowledge and expertise in this area into the curriculum I teach in social work theory and ethics and a unit on family and domestic violence and, of course, I have been a 'visible' vegan at such events in the past—the vegan catering for myself and the few other staff who are also vegan is often noted with colleagues often remarking that they wished they "had ticked the vegan" option.

Back to the 'uncomfortable feeling'… We are more than halfway through the day. We have come back from our lunch break. I am sitting with a table of people who are mostly well known to me but there is also a 'coming together' of sorts on days like this and you may see people who you hardly come across all year as we all frantically try to stay on top of our teaching, research and the ever-increasing administration load. It's a large gathering as we are a big school. A member of the school executive stands to announce that we will be taking a short break soon. This is notable given we had only shortly before come back from our lunch break. It's nearing 2pm. I wonder why we are breaking so soon again. I can't quite make it out but there is some mention of a TV in the adjoining room. There is a bristle of excitement in the room. It's then that it hits me. It seems we are breaking for the annual 'Melbourne Cup' horse race…

Promoted as the 'race which stops the nation' it has in more recent times become as well known for displays of public drunkenness, anti-social behaviour, sexual harassment and violence against women, gambling and, of course, horse injuries and death.

I look around the room at my colleagues, there's movement and people are getting ready to stand up and move. I gently ask for clarification from my table colleagues—"Is it the Melbourne cup? Is that what we are stopping for?". "Yes", comes the answer. Of course, it's not compulsory to watch the race just that we will stop the proceedings so that those that wish to, can. My mind is racing, and I can feel an ever-familiar sense of rising discomfort with the 'normality' of it all. Any vegan knows what I mean here. The way something involving cruelty, torture or death to animals is barely acknowledged or even noticed by most of those around us. It's a strange world to occupy and I have done so for many years, and I've never gotten used to it. In this case I am surrounded by social work academics, and I am frustrated that our actions are tacit approval of such an event that causes so much harm to both non-human and human animals. Surely, in this environment I could expect as a bare minimum that we would discuss this as a group. Is this something we believe honours our profession and reflects our values? I feel the frustration (and anger?) rising. Before I know it, I am on my feet saying these very words to the assembled group, the school executive member who made the announcement does not look impressed. I can feel my body shaking as I make my point—simply saying that I wish to register my disappointment and disapproval of this decision. I outline my reasons with as much clarity as I can and then sit down. I hear a few mumbles around the room. There's an awkward pause in the previously commenced movement toward the exit. People look uncomfortable. No one says anything … I get a smile of approval from a fellow vegan colleague nearby but still … there's a pause that feels like it lasts forever before there is a response from across the room from the school executive member. They are still standing. I detect a frustrated tone as they point out that they are "trying to cater for everybody" and that "you don't have to watch the race". We end up having a brief exchange across the large room. I reiterate that I don't believe this sits with our values as a profession and that we should not "cater" for this at all. I hear more rumblings around the room. Some people clearly want to get to the other room to watch the race. I catch a few disapproving glances and rolls of eyes.

I sit down and the group gradually disperses. A few people come up to me and say, "good on you" or "good point". I feel less alone on hearing this, but I am also conscious that I am probably being perceived by most in the room as

having caused ‘unnecessary’ trouble. A colleague and friend at the time comes up to me and rather gruffly says “what have you got against a little flutter? It’s just a bit of fun”. I’m almost speechless. I thought I had outlined comprehensively what ‘my’ problem was. He doesn’t wait for my reply as he rushes by me toward the TV room.

I make my way out of the room having decided I need to get away for a bit. We are breaking for 30 minutes so I have time for a walk. As I exit the room, I am approached by the member of the school executive who made the announcement. They appear upset and confront me. I am told that this a compromise position and that many of the staff had felt strongly about being offered the opportunity to watch the horse race. They express disappointment that I had appeared to (at least from their perspective) challenge their leadership. At this point I become aware of people watching the interaction. All I could do was re-iterate my points and explain that I was not trying to be a ‘troublemaker’ but that I felt I could not be silent on such an important issue. ‘A time and a place’, ‘a time and a place’ this seemed to be the message and yet I felt this *was* the time and the place—wasn’t it? I was also conscious as a rather lowly early career academic and new(er) member of the staff such interactions were probably not in my best interests. It became awkward as it was clear that the main issue was being interpreted as one of challenging the authority of the leadership in a way that was either inappropriate or embarrassing. I had intended neither, but I also felt that as social workers we need to say the hard things. Part way through this (increasingly tense) exchange a First Nations colleague with whom I had not worked closely, approached us and intervened, and I can remember the relief I felt. I can’t even remember what they said but it worked to diffuse the situation and showed a solidarity that calmed my nervous system immediately. It was suggested we go for a walk along the river together and much to my joy and surprise several staff started off with us as we made our way out of the building. Some were friends and close colleagues and others, people I had had very little do with in the time I had worked in the school. Yet, it was a simple act of solidarity that held me and helped me feel less alone in a moment where I felt I was being cast as an ‘outsider’, ‘disruptive’, ‘emotional’, ‘unruly/unrestrained’ woman, an example of an ‘extreme’ vegan.

Making meaning of vegan disruption within the confines of social work in the academy

Despite an upsurge in interest in green and critical social work, the topic of veganism and the treatment of animals is largely avoided with social work (Gordon, 2017; Gray & Coates, 2012; Wolf, 2000). A focus on animals is often dismissed as a topic that is at best a peripheral or tangential to more substantive concerns and at worst irrelevant or a distraction (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023; Peggs, 2017). Critical animal studies, arising out of the animal advocacy movement, vegan and critical theory highlights the mutually reinforcing intersectional oppressions that are invisibilised when we overlook animals as part of the social justice picture (Nocelle II et al., 2019). While social workers around the world place social justice at the core of the profession this remains bound by the limited scope afforded with the profession’s current human rights focus. It is still very much seen as a bridge “too far” even for those otherwise progressive academics I have worked alongside.

Social work attracts those of us who make connection between oppressions of all kinds—race, class, gender, sexuality and ability. This hasn’t always been a smooth road of course, and we remain on a

continuing journey as a profession to truly hear voices of First Nations people, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and those living with disability, for instance. Perhaps one of the differences for animals is that their voice is not directly heard, that they cannot *speak* their experience into spaces. Their cause is by necessity championed by others. As humans we cannot claim to speak directly from the *standpoint* of animals and, as such, our own positionality becomes central to the meaning of the encounter. Being the vegan voice in the room often casts one as a "disruptor", the person who at any moment may bring into focus the widely accepted (yet invisibilised) conventions of anthropocentric, speciesist culture. It is in these moments, within encounters such as the one outlined above that I have found various opportunities for connection, expansion and inclusion often coming from other "outsiders" within social work and at the same I have experienced the strong resistance and push back from those entrusted with "policing the borders" of anthropocentric containment that define social work ensconced within the walls of the neoliberal university. Many have observed how within an increasingly neoliberal corporate university context "outsider" or marginalised perspectives and voices meet resistance (Deshner et al., 2020; Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Sims, 2020). Motivated by a corporate agenda, governed by managerialism and consumer demand, universities have ironically become increasingly difficult places for questioning the status quo.

In reflecting upon this encounter, I am moved to consider the role care, connection, emotion and small acts of solidarity can have in a context driven by individualism and competition. The notion that to care for animals is in some way trivial or overly emotional (read: irrational) has a long history that aligns with feminised and reductive ideas of vegans and animal rights advocates (Duvnjak, 2011). And yet to *care* is of utmost importance as social workers, perhaps now more than ever. In the encounter above I am conscious of how the readily available trope of the *irrational vegan* may be deployed with additional impact in an academic setting where claims to objectivity and reason are prized and often deployed against minority voices. I view the actions of my colleagues on the "solidarity" walk as an act of resistance against this. It was powerful.

The reaction of my male colleague who stated "what have you got against a little flutter? It's just a bit of fun" *also* stands out to me. Sara Ahmed (2017) highlighted how the figure of the "feminist killjoy" has come to be deployed against feminists who dare to disrupt the "fun" and name the sexism in the joke or racism in the room. By disrupting the "happiness order" in the room Twine argued that "vegan-feminists constitute an especially poignant killjoy position" (2014, p. 626). There is always a choice to be made. While I recall feeling an immediate urge to stand up and speak out, the choice to remain silent frequently prevails in such contexts. As Twine explains, "[P]oliteness constitutes another social norm that is the enemy of the killjoy. Sometimes a vegan will preserve the 'happiness' exactly by deciding not to speak out" (2014, p. 626). On one assessment, my speaking out did not preserve the happiness in the room yet it produced an opportunity for a different kind of happiness, one that emerged from a moment of resistance and within the experience of solidarity displayed in the group walk making space for the disruptive voice.

The navigation of hostile discursive and social spaces is a central part of the lived experience of a being a vegan and this comes with its own set of somewhat predictable and familiar features (Buttney & Kinefichi, 2020; Twine, 2014). I am aware that over many years I have developed a tool kit of "survival" strategies. Chief amongst these is how to protect oneself, "choose your battles", while also ensuring that you stand up when it counts. It occurs to me that in some ways this mirrors the path of social work within universities where the desire to be "taken

seriously" as a profession can come into conflict with our more subversive and radical inclinations around social change. The vegan critique is still very much seen as a bridge "too far" even for otherwise progressive social work academics I have worked alongside. For those that do make room for consideration of animals it often sits adjacent to, yet seemingly separate from, other important political topics. It is my contention, however, that this separateness can no longer be maintained. Disruptive feminist vegan incursions into social work spaces are a critical part of this journey inviting us into a new radical social justice paradigm of liberation and justice for all beings.

Conclusion

Social work is not unique in having areas of oversight and failure that has perpetuated social injustice. Like many other helping professions, social work has had a role to play in social injustices against First Nations people, members of the LGBTQIA+ community and people with disabilities, for instance. Incongruence between social work values and the treatment of animals over the years is but another example of this. I also recognise the unique opportunities that my profession has offered to explore feminist vegan social work practice in meaningful ways. My analysis of my own experiences reveals the complexities of navigating the various identities and positionalities that come with being a vegan feminist voice in such settings. As we move ever closer to meaningful consideration of animals in social work as the next social justice frontier, we need to be aware of the mechanisms of inclusion, silencing and containment that have been deployed over the years in relation to the "disruptive" voices for an idea whose time has come.

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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 eco-systems* [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.

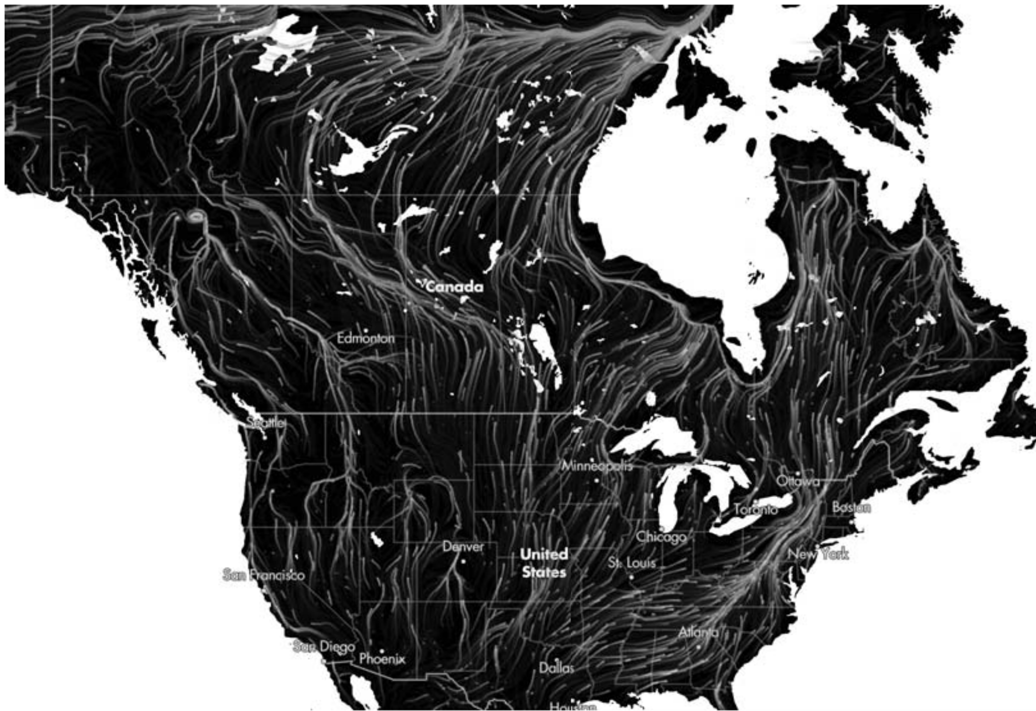

Figure 3 Migration Map of the United States and Canada

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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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

Animal-assisted social work at Flash Farm

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Flash Farm (FF) is a purpose-built therapeutic farm where people come to undertake animal-assisted social work (SW) including animal assisted educational activities to improve social, emotional, and cognitive wellbeing. For La Trobe University's Bachelor of Social Work students, field education includes approximately 14 weeks of supervised placement. For the past 6 years, FF has provided field education placements to SW and welfare students, where students attend the farm each day and engage in a range of activities including individual animal-assisted therapy (A-AT) sessions and group sessions that include life and social skills and psycho-educational workshops.

APPROACH: In this autoethnographic article, we consider the different perspectives that need to align for a successful student placement. We will discuss the perspectives of the university field education team who are looking at which student might be a suitable match for this placement, and the FF team who are looking for a student who will fit in with the farm operations. In addition, we discuss the perspective of the university field education liaison officer (FELO) who provides oversight and troubleshooting, and the student who wants to learn about social work practice and to integrate the theories that they have learned at university.

IMPLICATIONS: This auto-ethnography has been prepared to shine a light on the opportunities and complexities of A-AT and SW field education. Although outside the scope of this article, the experience of the clients and the animals needs to be considered in determining what constitutes successful social work placements.

Keywords: Animal-assisted social work, field education, social work

AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL WORK *37(1)*, 56–69.

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Flash Farm (FF) is a small farm located in a rural community near Bendigo in Victoria, Australia. Kristy Kemp (KK) is an experienced social worker who runs a unique animal-assisted social work (A-ASW) programme where clients engage in therapeutic activities while interacting with various farm animals such as horses, cows, sheep, alpacas, goats, donkeys and dogs. FF practitioners integrate evidence-based therapeutic techniques with the enriching elements of animals. At the core of FF ‹s philosophy is the commitment to person-centred care, where practitioners recognise and value the individual's lived experience and distinctive personality, fostering an environment where therapy is tailored to the unique needs of each person.

Therapeutic sessions at FF are hands-on and experiential, featuring goal-oriented, planned, and structured therapeutic interventions that are directed or delivered by a trained professional within the scope of their practice. A-ASW focuses on improving the physical, cognitive, behavioural, and socio-emotional wellbeing of the human recipient. The practitioner delivering A-ASW (or the person handling the animal) must have knowledge about the behaviour, needs,

health, and indicators of stress of the animals involved.

In this article, we explore the experiences of the placement team including KK who is a social worker (SW) at FF and is the placement field educator (FE), Hayley Sherry (HS) a SW student who completed her first SW placement at FF, Dr Natasha Long (NL) the university field education coordinator and Dr Helen Hickson (HH) a university field education liaison officer (FELO) with experience in supporting SW field education at the farm. KK, HH and NL have been working together for several years providing and supporting students undertaking field education placements. We recognised that FF was a unique placement experience, and we were keen to contribute to the conversation about successful social work placements that include animal-assisted SW and the alignment that is needed in social work education.

In Australia, SW students enrolled in accredited courses are required to undertake 1,000 hours of placement (AASW, 2020). The placement experience is part of a structured field education programme that includes opportunities to integrate theory and practice (Egan et al., 2018). Placement, clinical placement, field education are all terms used to explain this learning experience (Gardner et al., 2019) and are used interchangeably through this article.

Literature review

There is emerging interest in SW practice in animal therapy programmes with a notable increase in research and publications in recent years, see for example Gant and Meadows (2023), and Duvnjak and Dent (2023). This represents the broader recognition of the benefits of animal therapies to address social and emotional challenges and presents opportunities for SW field education in these practice contexts.

There is limited literature that aligns directly with the unique FF experience. The SW practice context of FF is a person-centred therapy programme that is conducted in the space of animals. The animals are in their home environment on the farm and visitors such as SW students and clients visit to engage with the animals. The animals become accustomed to regular visitors and to meeting different people. There is no formal training or standard for animal-assisted therapy. The animals at FF such as the horses and dogs have undertaken training and all the animals that are included in A-ASW at FF are assessed for temperament, safety, and soundness. There is a lengthy process before an animal is added to the animal therapy team. This is different from much of the research and commentary in the literature about A-ASW, where the animals, usually dogs, are trained as therapy animals and are taken to a SW setting where clients engage with the animals (Taylor et al., 2020; Winkle et al., 2020).

In the literature, there are different terms used to describe the animals and the roles that they perform such as *therapy dog*, *guide dog* or *emotional support animal* (Howell et al., 2022). Nomenclature is important and there are various terms used to describe the professional roles where animals provide support to people, such as animal-assisted therapy (A-AT), animal-assisted interventions (A-AI), and animal-assisted activities (Winkle et al., 2020). In this paper we use the term *animal-assisted social work* (A-ASW) to describe the activities at FF.

Social work practice with animal-assisted therapies

We were able to locate a small body of literature about SW with A-ASW published over the past 10 years, with articles published in Australia, Aotearoa New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. We identified three scoping reviews that explored animal-assisted interventions in universities (Cooke et al., 2023), nature-based interventions for vulnerable youth (Overbey et al., 2023) and nature-based interventions

in institutional and organisational settings (Moeller et al., 2018).

In Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, there is growing emphasis on the inclusion of animals in SW practice, including A-ASW, A-AT, animal-assisted activities and animal-assisted education (Taylor et al., 2016; Cooke et al., 2023; Walker et al., 2015; Walker & Tumilty, 2019); Fraser et al., 2021; Yeung et al., 2020). These papers describe SW interventions in a range of practice settings such as working with children (Taylor et al., 2016), youth mental health (Meadows et al., 2020), with refugee communities (Fraser, 2017), in universities (Cooke et al., 2023), and in the domestic and family violence context (Taylor et al., 2020).

In the international literature, there were studies about human–animal relationships and ways that SW integrated therapy animals in the practice context. In the US, Arkow (2020) identified the ways in which SW who were working in child protection and child safety, integrated pet support and practice dogs to support vulnerable populations.

Winkle et al. (2020) explored A-AT inclusion of dogs in formal intervention settings and identified the need for good dog welfare to keep animals and humans safe, and the importance of a good match between the dog, the client and the task. Hoy-Gerlach et al.'s (2019) writing about SW field education was introduced in a human society and described student learning opportunities, while Overby et al.'s (2023) scoping review outlined the potential for nature-based interventions in their scoping review. Compitus (2021) described the process of integrating A-AT into SW practice and argued that A-AT was considered an effective treatment for a variety of populations and conditions such as psychotherapy and cognitive based therapy, but there is limited research about how to integrate A-AT into clinical SW practice and how to measure impact and effectiveness of A-AT as a treatment model. Silberberg's (2023) article set out the challenges for SWs to think about their relationship with animals and to look beyond an anthropocentric perspective of practice to consider what self-determination and exploitation is from the animal's perspective. There is a body of literature by writers such as Kirby (2016) and Hallberg (2017) about equine-assisted therapies such as horses in health, mental health and social therapies.

In their scoping review, Moeller et al. (2018) investigated nature-based therapies, such as horticulture or gardening activities or A-AT in settings where individuals reside full time for care or rehabilitation purposes such as inpatient hospital wards, prisons and women's shelters.

Social work education and animal assisted therapies

Research is emerging about SW education and the ways in which human–animal relationships and animal therapy were identified. Arkow (2020) argued that SW education should include explicit focus on the value of human–animal relationships and include animals in family genograms, curricula and professional development activities. Similarly, Fraser et al. (2021) identified that animals including companion animals, farm animals and wildlife are relevant to green and disaster SW education and need to be explicitly included in the curriculum particularly in teaching assessment of person-centred practice. Duvnjak and Dent's (2023) survey of SW education programmes in Australia argued that content about SW practice with animals related mostly to the discussion of ethical issues and was generally incorporated in theory such as green SW, highlighting that there needs to be more explicit content about A-AT and this is a challenge in a crowded SW curriculum.

Social work field education and working with animals

We located three articles that explicitly described A-AT in SW field education. A

paper by Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) described the successful SW student placements at the Humane Society in the United States. One of the key features of this paper was the connection between animal welfare and human welfare. The authors discuss the opportunities, for learning and skill development as part of SW placements, to identify and respond to client strengths and concerns that ultimately support the well-being of both humans and animals.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Meadows et al. (2020) and Gant and Meadows (2023) described the integration of animal-related content into the SW courses at Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology (NMIT) and developed a partnership with The Nelson Ark, with a focus on integrating animals into their work with young people. This partnership included teaching into the Bachelor of Social Work programme and support of SW student field education.We were not able to identify any research or literature about SW student placements in an A-AT farm context. Whilst we understand that the focus on human–animal relationships in SW research and practice is developing, we consider there needs to be stronger focus on these relationships in the conventional SW curriculum and student learning experience.

Ethical issues

In the literature, ethical issues are raised about the inclusion of animals in SW settings. In their work, Taylor et al. (2016) argued that recognising animals as sentient beings with needs of their own leads to benefits for both humans and animals by challenging attitudes and behaviours. Walker and Tumilty (2019) argued that there needs to be an ethical code of conduct for practitioners to keep animals safe. Similarly, Silberberg's (2023) paper considered SW values and considers how SW can reconcile animal ethics and animal welfare principles with the animal's right of self-determination.

Gaps in the research

There is limited research in Australia about a regulatory framework of the integration of animals in SW practice including the need for animal welfare standards and professional liability considerations. In addition, there is a need for guidelines and standards to keep humans and animals safe.

There are gaps in the research about the benefits of animals in SW practice. There is a need for further research to evaluate the effectiveness of animal assisted interventions, identify best practice and the ways to measure success, and address the ethical and cultural aspects that are specific to the Australian context.

There are limitations in the literature about the importance of including A-AT in SW education, and this is a notable gap in curriculum and research literature. This results in a disconnect between the integration of learning about animals in SW university education and their experiences in fieldwork. There is a need for specialised training programmes and professional development opportunities to support SW to develop the knowledge and skills to implement animal-assisted interventions safely and effectively. Similarly, there is a gap in the literature about student experiences and needs in relation to field placement involving A-ASW.

There is growing recognition of the benefits of animals in SW practice in Australia; however, there remain challenges and opportunities for further education, research and interdisciplinary collaboration in order to maximise the effectiveness of therapies for clients and safe interventions for animals. In addition, collaborative interdisciplinary partnerships need to be developed between SW animal welfare organisations, veterinarians and other professionals involved in animal-assisted interventions. Through this article we hope to contribute to the ongoing discussions about A-ASW by providing a nuanced perspective about A-ASW and social work field education.

SW student placement at FF

The following section starts with a case study that highlights a typical placement experience at FF. The overview of the placement structure and process is presented as a case study and each of the authors shares their reflections about the placement experience and potential at FF from their specific perspectives.

Case study of animal assisted SW at FF

Introduction

FF is an innovative facility that integrates animal-assisted therapy with SW interventions, offering a unique environment where individuals can engage in therapeutic activities while interacting with various animals such as dogs, horses, cows, sheep, alpacas, goats, and more. Under the guidance of SW, students are introduced to SW theories in practice, in conjunction with animal-assisted therapy interventions.

Initial shadowing experience

During the initial phase of the placement, students shadow the SW to gain insights into the implementation of SW principles within the context of animal-assisted therapy. The SW creates a safe learning environment for the student to observe and understand how the human-animal bond can be used to effectively address clients' needs and goals.

Animal education

Safety of the animals is of critical importance to FF. The SW provides comprehensive animal education, including an introduction to each animal and discussion about their personality and likes and dislikes, as well as behaviour, nutrition, and health needs. This supports students to develop the knowledge and skills to interact confidently with different species, understand their individual personality and behaviours and the potential therapeutic benefits they offer.

Integration of social work and animal-assisted therapy

Students participate in one-to-one therapy sessions and group programmes facilitated at FF. Students are expected to apply their knowledge of SW theories and their readings from research about animal therapy to contribute to the development of client sessions tailored to individual needs. By harnessing the power of the human–animal bond, students work collaboratively with clients to identify and work towards their goals.

Client-centred approach

At FF, students prioritise a client-centred approach, recognising the importance of empowering individuals to articulate and achieve their aspirations. Through meaningful interactions with animals and guided therapeutic interventions, students facilitate a process where clients can explore their emotions, develop coping mechanisms, and enhance their overall wellbeing.

Research and learning

Throughout the placement, students engage in continuous research to deepen their understanding of animal-assisted therapy and its applications in SW practice. Students use their findings to inform practice interventions and enhance the effectiveness of client sessions, ensuring they are evidence-based and tailored to meet specific needs.

Conclusion

Placements at FF provide a rich learning experience where students can witness firsthand the transformative potential of integrating SW principles with animal-assisted therapy interventions. Students who engage in deep learning and prioritise the holistic wellbeing of individuals seeking support at FF, leave with a lasting impact on both clients and the broader community, and a SW placement experience that they will never forget.

When considering placement as a holistic learning experience, it is helpful to think about the life cycle of a placement, that is pre-placement planning, during placement and ending/post placement (Gardner et al., 2019; Cleak & Wilson, 2022). In this next section, we explore the various perspectives of the placement team in relation to each of the phases of the life cycle.

Pre-placement planning

The planning phase commences well before the start of the placement. During this phase, university staff will be sourcing placement offers, confirming student numbers, preparing students for placement (credentialing, field education curriculum delivery, etc.), and matching students to placement. Agency staff will be considering their capacity to offer a student placement, making arrangements with staff to supervise students, and preparing to interview potential students. Students will be thinking about how to juggle hours at placement and their other commitments such as work, childcare, and other caring responsibilities. During this stage, the student will be matched to an agency and the agency will arrange to interview the student (*note not all universities have pre-placement interviews). This interview is important for agency staff to consider the match of the student to the agency, how they align with the team, and the agency and if the agency has capacity to support the student's learning.

University perspectives about pre-placement matching (NL)

Field education is the distinctive pedagogy of SW education and a significant undertaking by students, agencies, and the university in terms of time and resources (Egan et al., 2018). Underpinning field education and the placement experience is the learning opportunities and supervisory support for students. The reciprocal benefits for agencies and agency staff who invest their time and resources to support the student on placement is also considered. These might include development of agency staff's supervisory skills and knowledge, reduced workload towards the end of the placement, or completion of a project that may not otherwise have been achieved. In addition, having the capacity to adequately support the placement student and agency staff via the FELO is also important. When thinking about matching a student to a placement at FF, these considerations are front of mind. As such, after confirming that a placement will be offered at FF, I email the student cohort (both first- and second-placement students) seeking their interest. In the email, I provide

the link to the FF website and ask students to let me know if they would be interested in a placement, noting that they will need to be comfortable working with both animals and people. I make a decision based on the strength of their email, their interests, and any follow-up conversations I have with the students. I am looking for students who have some experience with animals (can be animals as pets), are interested in thinking differently about *where* SW is delivered (in relation to spaces), who are self-motivated, and open to doing things differently. Once matched the student is then interviewed by KK at FF. The strength of the matching process is enhanced by the relationship KK and I have developed over the past 6 years.

As part of the pre-planning process, I also consider the match of the liaison person. Similarly to the student, the FELO needs to be able to think about placement differently and see the possibilities of placement learning opportunities outside of the walls of a traditional agency placement. The FELO is pivotal to supporting the students' learning in a non-traditional placement setting. Ideally, it would be helpful for the FELO to be involved in placement discussions with the student and agency as soon as placement starts, or perhaps even prior to placement starting, to help the student commence placement with an understanding of what to expect on placement.

Student perspectives of pre-placement planning (HS)

The first SW placement can be both anxiety-inducing and exciting—as this was my first placement with no prior experience in the industry, I was both, in buckets.

When I first found out about the opportunity of placement at FF, there were many thoughts, such as: I like SW, I like animals, I like to do things a bit differently, and I don't find myself particularly drawn to a desk-heavy role or clinical environments. I researched FF by looking at the website, social media, and asking around and it appeared to fit with my values and my learning style. However, I did not know much about what A-AT *actually was* and how SW was done at FF.

Before the placement started, students were encouraged to do their own research into their area of SW practice and the placement organisation before commencing—which I did. However, I found myself under pressure to do this as I was still completing a final assessment for another subject. I found many articles on canine- and equine-assisted therapy; however, I found a lack of resources on other animal species within a therapeutic environment. I had little knowledge from my previous studies as there is no prescribed reading in this area of SW. I had little previous A-AT knowledge, therefore I could not be sure what was relevant and what was not. I found more resources about *why* A-AT can be beneficial, but it was difficult to find resources on *how* it should be done. I was interested in finding out more about the ethical considerations for the animals.

For future students who are considering this area of placement and have limited knowledge about A-AT, it may be helpful to have a list of suggested readings about A-AT and SW. I suggest students interested in doing a placement approach with:

- A genuine openness to the experience.
- Willingness to be vulnerable and acknowledge their expectations are often formed from assumptions. Try to go with the flow.
- Patience to support service users in their own time (just be with them, be present, connect with them where they are at).
- Willingness to get hands dirty and be physical—it's a working farm.
- Genuine care and compassion for all included in the therapeutic relationship (service users, animals, practitioners, and the environment).
- Creativity—in all its variations. Essentially a willingness to think outside

of the box, while also incorporating SW theories.

Field educator (KK) perspectives of pre-placement planning

FF has capacity for one or two students at a time and needs to consider the mix of TAFE or university students. In the pre-placement planning phase, we need to think about the seasonal influences on the farm and the activities that a student could undertake or a particular aspect of the farm that needs attention such as supporting groups, research, or searching for funding opportunities.

Over the years, we have developed a strong relationship with the university and discussed placements that have gone well and placements that did not go so well to understand what works in the farm environment. We interview all prospective students, and we are looking for a student who will be open to doing things differently. We ask students to come to the farm for the interview and tell them about the farm and the model of practice and ask about their learning goals and aims for the placement. We include the animals and go into the paddock and observe the interaction between students and animals, watching the reaction from the animals to see if this relationship is going to work.

During placement

Placement ideally begins with an orientation to the organisation, where the student becomes familiar with the people and animals, and processes of the organisation. This is also a time when the supervisory relationship between the student and supervisor is being developed and it is important to approach this aspect of the placement intentionally and by beginning with a discussion about understandings of supervision, expectations, and learning styles. It is also important the students make contact early in the placement with the liaison person to set up the liaison meetings. It is understood that the beginning of placement can be stressful and overwhelming for students (Gardner et al., 2019) and establishing good processes early in placement can mitigate this for students. After orientation, during the middle (perhaps the *doing* phase) of placements, students are exposed to a range of learning opportunities that aim to increase their SW knowledge and skills and their professional identity. As stated in the distinctive pedagogy statement (Egan et al., 2018, p. 41):

> SW education prepares students for entering professional practice through acquiring core knowledge, skills and values that can be applied across various practice settings and using a range of modalities … Students make sense of what it means to be a SW by developing their professional identity, integrity and practice framework.

Field educator (KK) perspective—during placement at FF

Placement starts with orientation to the farm and meeting the animals and understanding the daily routine at the farm. Students will shadow staff, meet clients, and observe therapeutic activities with permission from the clients. As students become more confident, they begin to work more independently and there is the aim that students will work independently and as part of the team, with clients and small groups, under supervision as required. Students will also work independently with the animals undertaking activities such as feeding, cleaning, and moving animals around the farm. Student activities include:

- Conducting assessments of the client's needs and goals, considering the potential benefits of A-AT.
- Developing and implementing A-AT plans tailored to each client's needs, incorporating interactions with animals into therapeutic interventions.

- Facilitating individual and group therapy sessions that integrate interactions with animals as a therapeutic modality.
- Collaborating with staff to ensure the wellbeing and safety of clients and animals during therapy sessions.
- Utilising the unique environment of the farm to create therapeutic activities and exercises that promote relaxation, emotional regulation, and social interaction.
- Engaging clients in animal care activities, such as grooming, feeding, and walking, to foster a sense of responsibility, empathy, and connection.
- Utilising observations of client–animal interactions to assess clients' emotional states, attachment patterns, and relational dynamics.
- Educating clients about the therapeutic benefits of A-AT and how to incorporate these experiences into their daily lives.
- Collaborating with other professionals, such as veterinarians or animal behaviour specialists, to address any animal-related concerns or challenges that arise during therapy sessions.
- Documenting client progress, session outcomes, and observations related to A-AT therapy interventions in client records.
- Participating in ongoing training and supervision related to A-AT techniques, ethics, and best practices in SW.

During placement, the field educator (KK) is looking for support from the placement team, including a liaison person who understands the practice context and is open to thinking outside the box.

FELO (HH) perspective—during placement at FF

As FELO, I am interested in the structure of placement and both implicit and explicit connections to SW theory and practice. I like to talk with the student early in the placement to understand their learning goals and what they hope to get out of the placement experience. It is important to build this connection with the student so that if there are problems they can be quickly identified and discussed. SW students at FF are likely to be solo students on placement and this can lead to some students feeling concerned about missing out on other learning opportunities that they hear about from their peers or feeling isolated. It is important to address these concerns and discuss opportunities for students to connect with other students on placement, either formally or informally.

SW practice at FF is different to the practice examples that are used in teaching and some students find a gap between their assumptions and expectations about field education and the reality of placement. This gap seems to happen for students at FF, perhaps because the practice context seems to be very different to the case study and role play activities that students experience throughout their university education. Once students begin to explore what they know about social theories and practices, the connections with the placement activities become clearer.

I have supported a couple of students on placement in this organisation and visited the farm to meet with students. I know what it looks like, and I understand the practice environment and the types of activities that students will be involved with. I have found that sometimes students are not able to easily identify SW practice in the placement context, and it can take a bit of work to see SW theories and practices that are used in the FF context. Over the years, I have met KK a few times and had lots of conversations about SW theories and practice and I understand her practice approach, so there is a beginning relationship in place, we are able to quickly catch up and do not need to cover old ground.

It is important that the FELO has visited the farm, met the SW and understood the practice context, and what happens at the farm. The FELO needs to understand

the day-to-day farm operations and the context and philosophical underpinning of the practice model. In addition, the FELO needs to understand the activities that are expected of the student, which might include farm-related activities and SW activities. This is important because the FELO can help students to think about SW-related learning activities that connect between placement activities (such as feeding animals) and the university's placement learning activities (research theories about A-AT). We know that when students develop a learning plan with integrated learning activities it is more engaging, and leads to meaningful learning, and less work (Hickson et al., 2015).

Student (HS) perspective—during placement at FF

Placement started with observing, getting to know the clients and animals and shadowing the team. When preparing for placement, I did not know much about A-AT and although I read widely, I was not sure what was relevant to the farm practice. I found resources about the benefits of A-AT but still was not sure about how to do A-AT. I found that all the "how" knowledge came while I was on placement. I had many relevant reading materials and an experienced field educator. I was able to shadow and see the doing and then able to connect theory to practice. I was still learning the "how" all the way through placement, right up until the end; each day brought different experiences and opportunities to do A-ASW.

Students need to consider that while this is a SW placement, it is SW *on a farm*. There may be assumptions about what SW is in this setting. For example, does helping a farrier perform hoof trims seem like SW? To some people, it probably does not, but in this placement context, animals are included in the therapeutic process. Building relationships, connection and importantly, trust, with service users cannot happen if there is no trust between the practitioner and the animal. It is similar to building relationships with people, where trust does not often happen overnight. A-ASW requires knowledge about animal behaviour and wellbeing but also respect for the animal and mutual trust—this keeps everyone safe and is an essential component for facilitation of A-ASW. In a sense, you are a SW for the animals, as well as the service users.

It is important to consider the context of the placement. At FF, individual therapeutic sessions and group programmes are offered, and this may be different to other placement contexts. This requires some adaptability in building one-to-one relationships with service users and facilitating group sessions. In addition, the placement context is SW in private practice. Some days there will not be direct work with a client, perhaps due to a cancellation or where a client does not consent to a student in their therapeutic session. This time needs to be productive, and students will need to be organised and self-directed. Activities could include working on the placement learning plan, supervision, researching A-ASW, or building relationships with the animals.

During placement, I sometimes felt isolated from my cohort. I often perceived some mutual inability to relate with my peers as their experience in larger organisations was quite different from my own. I found placement assessment record (PAR) tasks difficult to discuss with peers as they were often able to tick off things quite easily, whilst mine required extra creative thought. It was helpful to discuss PAR activities with my field educator as they were able to guide me in the right direction.

Placement can be uncertain and stressful and one of my main concerns during placement was completing PAR tasks and perhaps this was related to my personality and neurodivergence. I was fortunate to have access to a desk in a private office and the time to complete tasks was generous, which was incredibly helpful. At FF, students were expected to self-direct their learning and

ensure appropriate balancing of time, and I understand from my peers that this was common to all placements.

It was helpful to work with an experienced field educator, who made time for debriefing which was essential to my learning. Much of my learning and consolidation of theory and practice came from the informal chats we had while on a break, between clients, and even while out repairing fences and feeding the animals.

Ending phase/post-placement

Like the beginning of placement, the ending phase of placement can evoke a range of emotions (Gardner et al., 2019) for students, supervisors, and liaison staff. It is helpful to have a plan about the ending of placement early in the placement (Cleak & Wilson, 2022) so that this part of the placement is a considered experience rather than a rush to the end. This is a time for students to finish working with clients or complete the project (if a project-based placement), to say farewell to staff, and to reflect on their learning and next steps. Similarly, this is a time for supervisors and agencies to prepare clients and staff for the ending of the student placement and to review with the student and others the experience of the placement to inform future student placements in the agency. It is helpful for the FELO to seek reflections from the student and supervisor about the placement experience, and to consider any improvements in placement planning and student preparedness in the future. It is important to note that, whilst conversations about the student experience are important, a power imbalance exists between student and the supervisor, agency, and university and hence the student may not feel able to provide honest feedback (Cleak & Wilson, 2022; Gardner et al., 2019)

Student (HS) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

There were mixed emotions at the end of placement at FF. The placement experience opened a new SW practice pathway that I did not know was available and it reinforced my passion to advocate for animals in SW including ethical rights of animals and our responsibility to care for animals, nature, others, and self. I reflected on social norms: hierarchy humans over animals and the natural environment; the taken-for-granted assumptions that clinical room-based therapy is the gold standard. I was able to incorporate my SW education about Indigenous knowledge, green SW, anti-oppressive practice and a feminist perspective. I reflected on what seemed to be a lack of knowledge about animals in SW and what could be done to raise awareness both in the curriculum and in practice. I note that the AASW *Code of Ethics* contains only one sentence on responsibilities to animals and I would like to see this expanded. It would be useful to have a debriefing and reflection activity with other students after placement has ended, along with support to work out how to apply learning from placement to other areas of SW.

FELO (HH) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

Towards the end of the placement, the FELO role becomes very task-focussed, ensuring that all milestones have been met, placement reports are in order, and placement hours have been correctly recorded. I like to talk with students about highlights from their placement learning and what they will take with them to their next placement or practice. I am aware of the power imbalance where some students might not feel comfortable to talk freely about their placement experience while there are still assessment structures in place.

In a best practice context, it is useful to review the placement, and identify what happened, what we learned to support students, the agency, the university and what we need to remember for placements in the future, both for this student and in this placement context. We need to think about how we gather this information from students and neutralise the institutional

power that is inherent in the relationship between the student and university.

Field educator (KK) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

The closing phase of a student placement at FF is a time to ensure that the student has met their objectives, completed their tasks and had time for goodbyes with both clients, animals, and staff. One of the central tasks is ensuring that the student has satisfactorily completed their PAR tasks. These tasks are not merely checkboxes to tick off but represent a culmination of their learning and application of SW principles in a real-world setting. It is essential to guide them through this process, ensuring they have grasped the significance of their work and how it contributes to the broader goals of our organisation.

As client sessions conclude, I take the opportunity to offer feedback to the student. This is not just about highlighting areas for improvement but also recognising their strengths and the progress they have made throughout their placement. Constructive feedback is crucial for growth, along with acknowledgment of their achievements and skills developed. It is not uncommon for students to develop deep connections with the animals on the farm. These animals often serve as sources of comfort, companionship, and even therapeutic support. Therefore, it is important to create time for the student to farewell these creatures who have become an integral part of their placement experience. These goodbyes are poignant reminders of the human–animal bond.

Beyond the formalities of task completion and feedback, I believe in providing space for reflection. After the formal feedback session, I offer the student an opportunity to reflect on their overall placement experience. This reflection is not just about looking back but also about looking forward, identifying areas where we, as an organisation, can improve in our delivery of student placements and how we can enhance the learning experience for future students.

Through these reflective conversations, we gain valuable insight into what worked well during the placement and what aspects could be refined or expanded upon. It is a collaborative process aimed at continuous improvement, both for the students, FF and the university.

University (NL) perspectives on the ending phase of placement

As placements draw to an end, I encourage students to think about *finishing placement well*. I remember reading the chapter "Finishing Well" in Cleak and Wilson's book *Making the Most of Placement Field Placement* many years ago in one of the earlier editions of the book (see most recent edition, Cleak & Wilson, 2022). The importance of developing this ability to finish well really resonated with me, in relation to the messages about finishing placement well with colleagues, with clients and for A-ASW, animals. Towards the end of placement, students come together at university, and we talk about this idea, and they brainstorm what this means for them.

Currently students are invited to provide me with informal feedback about their experiences; however, a best practice approach would include more formal ways for students to provide an evaluation of their placement experience.

Conclusion

SW field education is expanding into new and interesting domains. For successful SW placements, it is important for the placement team to be engaged and understand the expectations of the student and the organisation. The FELO needs to understand the SW practice context and day-to-day activities that are expected of the student, which might include farm-related activities and SW activities. Students

might need support to engage with other students during placement and to translate learning from this placement to other fields of practice. There are opportunities for SW educators to better integrate animals in SW theory and practice and for researchers to evaluate the effectiveness of animal-assisted interventions and explore the multi-disciplinary context of working with animals.

Limitations

In this paper we focussed on the elements of a successful student placement, and it is important to recognise that not all placements in this practice context will go well. This may be for a range of reasons including the student not feeling confident or comfortable in the animal environment or a mismatch in personalities. We emphasise the importance of pre-placement interviews on site to explore first impressions, expectations, and assumptions about the placement.

Recommendations for SW placement team

Successful animal-assisted SW placements require engagement of the placement team, including the student, FELO, university staff and the field educator.

Our recommendations for successful animal-assisted SW placements:

- Evaluation of the quality and suitability of the placement and clarification about what the student will actually do on a day-to-day basis.
- Engagement of the placement team and commitment to supporting placement context.
- Animal-assisted SW is embedded into the curriculum, e.g., include animals in case studies, role plays, genograms, suggested readings, animal ethics, guest speakers.
- External peer supervision or support for students in solo practice placements.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Closing the "PAWS" gap through pet-inclusive social work training and practice: Professional responses that incorporate human–animal relationships

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Despite a majority of households having at least one companion animal that they consider family members, human–animal relationships are largely ignored in social work training and practice.

METHODS: This article identifies a "People and Animals' Wellness and Safety (PAWS) gap" in social work practice, six reasons why social workers should be cognizant of clients' relationships with their animal companions, and a process of "3-Rs": recognition, response and referral. Nine opportunities whereby social workers can address human–animal relationships across pet-inclusive social work practice settings and populations are identified, along with action steps and emergent career opportunities.

FINDINGS: The PAWS gap can be closed by social work educators and practitioners by routinely and proactively assessing clients for their relationships with their animals. Such relationships may be strengths or stressors that impact clients' wellbeing, decision-making, and potential risk of violence.

IMPLICATIONS: The failure to consistently address human–animal relationships and support clients' animal-related concerns misses opportunities to identify clients' risk and resiliency factors, to enhance social and environmental justice, and to provide services to all vulnerable members of families and communities.

Keywords: Human–animal relationships, animal cruelty, training, career opportunities, policy and practice

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The "PAWS" gap

Despite 64% of households having companion animals that are often considered as family members (Forrest et al., 2023), and pets often serving as sources of strength, resilience and social support whose wellbeing impacts persons' ability to thrive, neither pre-professional training, continuing education, psychosocial assessments nor social work practice routinely address clients' relationships with their pets. Therapeutic-animal-assisted interventions, the link between animal abuse and human violence, and the psychological and emotional impacts of animal companionship on child development, healthy aging, mental health, and reducing loneliness and social

isolation are a *terra incognita* in social work. Field placement internships in animal shelters are rare (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019). Only a few genograms include household animals (Hodgson & Darling, 2011). Only 3% of United States (US) schools of social work address the potential import of clients' companion animals, and then only peripherally (National Link Coalition, 2023). We refer to this gap in social work knowledge and responsiveness as the PAWS (people and animals' wellness and safety) gap.

This PAWS gap is ironic. Social work's underpinnings of social justice and correcting power imbalances helped develop child protection, which emerged from the animal-protection movement in the 19th century. Today, even stronger links between animal cruelty and domestic violence are emerging. The lack of agency and autonomy afforded to children, women and animals reflects broader systemic inequalities; recognising this can help prevent situations of violence.

Responding to clients' emotional bonds with their companion animals and the risk factor of animal maltreatment—both of which can impact clients' quality of life, decision-making, and potential escalation into domestic, child, and elder abuse—does not challenge the epistemic underpinnings of the discipline but, rather, broadens it.

Resources are becoming more widely available to help social workers appreciate the significance of human–animal relationships and animal cruelty, the implications of ignoring these factors, and the need to include vulnerable animals in social justice concerns (see, e.g., Arkow, 2020; Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019; Hoy-Gerlach & Wehman, 2017; Risley-Curtiss, 2013; Strand & Faver, 2005; Yeung et al., 2020).

Individual, institutional, legislative, and peer factors have prevented the systemic introduction of human–animal relationships into social work. In this article we propose operationalising "the 3-R's"—recognition, response and referral—to positive and negative human–animal relationships and identifying ways to incorporate pet-inclusive awareness into career opportunities as means to close the PAWS gap to protect more people and animals.

Six reasons why social workers should be cognizant of human–animal relationships

1. Today's definition of "family" includes its non-human members

The percentage of pet owners who consider pets as family members has been estimated at 99%, with rates of dog and cat ownership highest in households with children; female household members have primary responsibility for pets' care (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007, 2018). Veterinarians have been called "the other family doctor" (National Link Coalition, 2019). Social workers may miss significant touchstones in family dynamics if they neglect to inquire about the animals and any attachments and problems with them.

2. Pets enhance communities' social capital

Seeing human–animal relationships in a social context can reveal clients' connectivity to, or isolation from, the community. Putnam (2000) defined "social capital" as the community forces that build social cohesion, personal investment, reciprocity, civic engagement, and interpersonal trust. But Putnam notably failed to include the influence of pets in a community (Arkow, 2013). This gap was addressed in studies in Australia and the US, which reported that companion animals are positively associated with social capital, civic engagement and perceptions of neighborhood friendliness. Seeing neighbours walking dogs gave residents feelings of greater collective safety and sense of community. Pet owners were more likely to vote, to exchange favours with neighbours, to volunteer, and to participate in civic activities (Wood et al., 2005; Wood et al., 2017).

3. Inquiring about pets can build rapport and trust

Hodgson et al. (2017) found that asking patients about their pets enables better environmental/social history taking, facilitates

open communication, reveals clinically relevant information, and strengthens the therapeutic alliance. Because animals slip under the radar of human defence mechanisms, clients who are under stress may be more willing to talk about their animals before describing their own vulnerabilities (Melson & Fine, 2015). Discussing pets can segue into information about family support systems and the utilisation of resources and help establish a caring persona and a trusting relationship (Boat, 2010).

4. Children's positive and negative experiences with animals can have lifelong implications

Jalongo (2004) described bonds formed or broken with companion animals in childhood as reverberating and resonating across the lifespan. Children's committing or witnessing animal cruelty:

- may be sentinel warnings of a dysfunctional environment and other antisocial behaviors (Gullone, 2012);
- are a risk factor for perpetrating animal cruelty, bullying behaviours and violence against humans (Gullone & Robertson, 2008; Parkes & Signal, 2017; Vaughn et al., 2011; Walters, 2019);
- May lead to normalisation of violence against pets, decreased empathy and maladaptive coping mechanisms, particularly if there is co-occurring family violence (Ladny & Meyer, 2019; McDonald et al., 2018).

5. Knowledge of animal abuse can reveal other forms of family violence

Animal abuse and neglect can be sentinel indicators of concurrent, prior or future child maltreatment, domestic violence and elder abuse. Power relationship imbalances transcend species lines: when animals are abused, people are at risk, and when people are abused, animals are at risk (Arkow, 2019). Abusers often exploit women's and children's emotional attachments to their pets by threatening, hurting or killing the animals; this coercive control keeps victims from extricating themselves from domestic violence (Roguski, 2012; Taylor et al., 2020; Urban Resource Institute & National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2021).

Concurrent domestic violence and animal cruelty create extreme high-risk environments where interpersonal violence is more hands-on, lethality risks to first responders increase significantly, and victims are more likely to have had forced non-consensual sex and to fear for their lives (Campbell et al., 2017). Children exposed to domestic violence were reported to be three times more likely to commit animal cruelty than children not exposed to intimate partner violence (Currie, 2006).

6. Pet loss can be significant

The disappearance or death of a pet can bring a profound sense of loss with patterns of bereavement similar to the death of a human family member or friend. However, a disenfranchised grief over loss receives minimal support from society (Rémillard et al., 2017). The decision to euthanise a beloved animal companion can generate significant emotional trauma (Dunn et al., 2005; Laing & Maylea, 2018). Forced separations from pets during disasters, domestic violence or health crises can result in negative psychological impact and increased safety risks for people who choose to stay with and protect their pets (Montgomery et al., 2024; Oosthuizen et al., 2023). Social workers trained in grief and loss theory can help individuals make difficult decisions, navigate options, memorialise the animal, resolve feelings of guilt, and achieve closure.

Nine career opportunities that close the PAWS gap through recognition, response and referrals

1. Veterinary medicine

Social work's introduction into human–animal relationships began in 1978 with pet loss counseling at the Veterinary Hospital of the University of Pennsylvania (Quackenbush & Glickman, 1983) and at

New York City's Animal Medical Center in 1983 (Beck & Katcher, 1996).

The Veterinary Social Work collaboration between the Colleges of Social Work and Veterinary Medicine at the University of Tennessee—Knoxville, in 2002 created a new specialty practice. Over 400 veterinary social work graduates and current students can serve in veterinary clinics, teaching hospitals and animal shelters. They can address veterinary compassion fatigue and wellness issues, clients' grief management; animal-assisted interventions; and the link between animal cruelty and human violence. However, these 400 individuals represent a mere 0.05% of the total US social work profession.

Veterinary social workers can address inequitable access to veterinary care affected by affordability, transportation, clinic locations, and cultural and language barriers frequently associated with ethnicity, low income, young age, geographic area, and lower levels of education. These result in disparities in health outcomes for animals in underserved areas and populations (Blackwell & O'Reilly, 2023).

A new opportunity that can rely on social work support is in engaging veterinarians to recognise and respond to suspected domestic violence survivors (Larkin, 2018; Newland et al., 2019). Veterinary professionals can be potential touchpoints for domestic violence victims and play a key role in facilitating multi-agency collaboration, provided they have adequate training, support, and the confidence and capacity to respond (Paterson et al., 2024).

Aotearoa New Zealand is a pioneer in this global movement. The New Zealand Veterinary Association (NZVA) described veterinary medicine as a three-dimensional profession with a unique voice in issues that transcend animal life, human life and the environment. NZVA called for domestic violence protection-from-abuse orders to specifically include animals, and for changing the definition of domestic violence to include "coercive control" which would include emotional and psychological abuse to family members through threat or harm to animals (National Link Coalition, 2015). The Veterinary Council of New Zealand (2013) recommended that veterinarians confronting animal abuse should consider whether people within that home might also be at risk and prepare the practice to respond to domestic violence.

Scotland's Medics Against Violence collaborative of human and veterinary healthcare professionals created a Domestic Abuse Veterinary Initiative to train veterinarians to help pet owners escape domestic violence (Animal Welfare Foundation and The Links Group, 2016). Scotland had identified veterinarians, dentists and hairdressers as the three front-line professionals most likely to encounter domestic violence survivors (Paterson, 2015). The UK's Code of Professional Conduct for Veterinary Surgeons states, "Given the links between animal, child and domestic abuse, a veterinary surgeon or veterinary nurse reporting suspected or actual animal abuse should consider whether a child or adult within that home might also be at risk" (Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, 2016, s. 14.27). The Canadian Veterinary Medical Association's policy on veterinary responsibility to address animal abuse and neglect (2018) describes veterinarians and technicians as important in identifying human and animal victims of abuse, thereby breaking cycles of violence.

Recognition, response and referral

Veterinary professionals may be trusted confidantes and an underutilised intervention point for domestic violence survivors with animals, especially those who have been isolated from friends, family, and community (Paterson et al., 2024). Trained to work with people, social workers can help introduce protocols and

responses to intimate partner violence while the veterinarian focuses on her or his expertise in animal health. Social workers can disseminate domestic violence literature to clients and coordinate pet care programs with domestic violence refuges.

Social workers can help reduce barriers to access to care for companion animals in underserved communities, supporting the human-animal bond as a primary, secondary and tertiary public health intervention (Hoy-Gerlach & Townsend, 2023).

2. Child-protection agencies
The evolution of today's animal welfare movement parallels that of protecting children, who were once also classified as property (Arkow & Lockwood, 2013). Yet, despite the social reformer origins of child protective services established by Societies for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in the 19th century (Hoy-Gerlach et al., 2019), today's child and animal welfare agencies rarely collaborate (Arkow, 2010; Zilney & Zilney, 2005).

The emotional impact of animals in children's lives cannot be overstated (Risley-Curtiss, 2013). Companion animals overwhelmingly reside in households with children (American Veterinary Medical Association, 2007). Melson (2001) reported that pets are more likely to be a part of children's lives than are siblings or fathers. An estimated 80% to 90% of children first confront the loss of a loved one when a pet dies, disappears, or is abandoned (Melson & Fine, 2015). Children's caring for animals offers gender-neutral opportunities for developing nurturing skills and feelings of self-efficacy among children who feel dependent and powerless (Melson, 2013).

Pets can be a sub-system within a complex family system and many children turn to their pets for reassurance and emotional support during times of stress (Risley-Curtiss, 2013). Including questions and observations about current and past animals in a child's environment, the meaning those animals have for each family member, their care, and whether any of them have been killed or hurt can enhance effective family-centered practice (Risley-Curtiss, 2013).

Children may feel safer talking about their pets' experiences before they disclose their own, thereby opening a friendly channel to gain important insights (Boat, 2010; Melson & Fine, 2015). Questions about their names, breeds, play activities, deaths or disappearances, health problems or injuries, and secrets the child shares with them may fill in details of the family dynamics, patterns of power and control, and a child's risk and resiliency factors. Introducing therapy animals into the interview process can further build rapport.

This may be particularly important in working with sexually abused children (Reichert, 1998), given evidence of a nexus between bestiality and child sexual abuse. Children may be groomed for sexual behavior through animal sexual abuse or animal pornography, often by a close family member who is in a position of trust over the child (Edwards, 2019; Canadian Centre for Child Protection, 2018).

Recognition, response and referral

Systemic disproportionalities in reporting and enforcing child abuse and neglect at all levels of decision-making in child welfare systems may be rectified through culturally responsive, trauma-informed services and community-led strategies and interagency relationships. Regrettably, animal protection agencies have historically been excluded from these collaboratives. Social workers can facilitate cross-sector community engagement between the human and animal welfare sectors to better utilise community resources and safeguard vulnerable children and animals.

Pet-inclusive practice can lead to more accurate assessments of child safety and wellbeing (Arkow, 2020):

a. In child welfare checks and case management, look for animal health and welfare issues that can affect the child: abused, neglected, starving, aggressive or dangerous animals; animals needing veterinary care; excess numbers of animals; and fleas and other parasites. Include these findings in evaluating the child's living environment, lifestyle and risk factors.
b. Consider a frequent turnover of animals as a potential indicator of a family's inability to make lasting emotional attachments.
c. Treat emotional attachments to pets as a protective factor which may help build resiliency, and the death or disappearance of animals as emotionally significant.
d. Identify whether the child has been traumatised by witnessing or causing the abuse or death of animals.
e. Consider animal maltreatment as a factor supporting a finding of child abuse or neglect.

Social workers should report suspected animal maltreatment to the appropriate agency, such as the local SPCA Centre (or the Ministry for Primary Industries for livestock animals). Establishing channels of communication with these agencies in advance can simplify reporting when animal abuse is suspected. The reporter need not prove that animal abuse occurred but merely introduces the case into those agencies' systems to follow through as warranted. Confidentiality restrictions may be waived in reporting to law enforcement agencies or when the health or safety of the client and others are threatened.

3. Children's advocacy centres and courthouse facility dogs
Pet-inclusive social work can involve facility animals in children's advocacy centres, family justice centers and courtrooms who provide emotional support to sexual abuse survivors as they undergo forensic examinations, re-live their experiences, and confront their abusers (LaBahn, 2015). Guidelines protect the interests of the animal, the victim, the defendant, and the criminal justice system to prevent violating confidentiality or adversely eliciting sympathy from a jury (Courthouse Dogs Foundation, 2015). However, these dogs are not currently believed to be working in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers in victim services can be trained to be therapy animal handlers during children's interviews and testimony. They can also facilitate interactions between dogs and distraught family members and stressed facility staff and can connect these individuals with community resources.

4. Animal care centres
Animal sheltering centres have historically been isolated from human services agencies, creating a "silo" effect that hinders cross-disciplinary collaborations (Becker & French, 2004). Centre personnel face severe emotional stressors: witnessing animal suffering and euthanasia; making life-and-death decisions; abusive clients; negative public perceptions; and attachments to animals under their care (Schneider & Roberts, 2016). Few facilities have yet to engage veterinary social workers to respond to these stressors. This increases the risk of harm to people and animals.

Some animal centres are breaking out of the silos. Their service philosophy is evolving to recognise that animal homelessness, abuse and neglect are merely symptoms of greater societal problems. To be truly effective, underlying community and family dysfunction and violence must be addressed (PetLynx, 2011).

Some animal shelters collaborate with juvenile and adult detention centres in animal-assisted therapy interventions; individuals who have offended, or who are at risk, train dogs with behaviour problems who are at risk of being euthanised. These programmes teach teamwork, non-violent conflict resolution and collaboration skills to save animals' lives and modify the behaviours of abusive and traumatised individuals (Arkow, 2019).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can facilitate bridging segregated human and animal services delivery systems through the profession's commitment to community-level action, intervention and change. Social workers can link animal centres with community coalitions and social services agencies to coordinate inter-disciplinary relationships, particularly cross-reporting animal, child and elder abuse, to better protect vulnerable populations (Long & Kulkarni, 2013).

Hoy-Gerlach et al. (2019) described promising opportunities for social work field placements in animal centres: reducing staff and volunteers' compassion fatigue; placing pets as emotional support animals; strengthening responses to child, elder and animal abuse investigations; creating cross-sector educational programming; and increasing awareness of the link between violence to animals and humans. When SPCA animal welfare inspectors observe environmental conditions detrimental to the wellbeing of humans, social workers can make referrals to social services agencies.

Other social work opportunities in animal centres include:

a. collaborating with domestic violence refuges and mobile meals programmes;
b. directing animal-assisted visits in long-term care facilities;
c. designing pet loss grief support groups;
d. developing safety nets for individuals experiencing medical, economic or housing crises that make it temporarily difficult to keep their animal;
e. defusing contentious confrontations with shelter customers and resolving their complaints and needs for services;
f. connecting pet owners with low-cost veterinary services, animal behavioural counselors, pet food banks, and social services agencies.

5. Women's refuges

Family violence abusers employ "emotional blackmail" (Arkow, 2014) to exploit victims' vulnerability through their emotional attachment to pets. Threats or harm to pets and livestock are barriers causing many individuals to delay seeking safety in fear for their animals; 97% of callers to the US national crisis line said their animals' welfare is a consideration, and 50% would not leave if they could not secure safety for their pets (Urban Resource Institute & National Domestic Violence Hotline, 2021).

Animal cruelty is one of the four greatest risk factors for someone becoming a physical abuser (Walton-Moss et al., 2005). Co-occurring animal abuse magnifies the risk of lethality to law enforcement officers responding to family violence incidents and dramatically increases the number of incidents a victim endures before gaining the courage to seek help (Campbell et al., 2017; Campbell et al., 2018).

Until recently, women's refuges would not accept animal members of abused families. Roguski (2012) first demonstrated this phenomenon in Aotearoa New Zealand, describing pets as "pawns" in perpetrators' threats to attain and maintain control of the family. The National Collective of Independent Women's Refuges subsequently recommended that abuse towards women, children and animals should be addressed simultaneously and that pets be a central consideration in safety planning (Jury et al., 2018).

Global response has been dramatic. More than 300 women's refuges in the US, Canada, Australia, the UK, Spain, and the Netherlands now co-shelter pets (Sheltering Animals & Families Together, 2024). In the US, 41 of 50 states now allow courts to include animals in domestic violence protection-from-abuse orders; 19 states define animal abuses intended to intimidate a family member as an act of domestic violence; and eight states allow courts to award custody of pets in divorce settlements to the party identified as being in the animals' best interests.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can help plan innovative pet-inclusive processes in women's refuges and collaborate with SPCA centres to more effectively help women, children and animals achieve safety (Strand & Faver, 2005):

a. Gathering information about the status of animals and their (mis)treatment during crisis line calls, refuge intakes and risk assessments.
b. Identifying and making referrals to pet-friendly transitional housing, affordable veterinary care, pet boarding, and foster care.
c. Helping clients establish ownership by getting animals' licenses, vaccination records, microchips, pedigree papers, and receipts from pet stores and veterinary clinics in her name. This may mitigate contentious custody disputes in divorce settlements.
d. Including information about acts of animal cruelty in mental health assessments, rehabilitation of abusers, and the Specialized Domestic Violence Assessment of Risk to Children.
e. Including provisions for pets in safety plans.
f. Obtaining information from SPCA about prior investigations at the household.
g. Inviting animal-assisted therapy teams into refuges where appropriate.
h. Counseling children who have witnessed or committed animal maltreatment, death or disappearance of pets.
i. Coordinating veterinary care for animals in women's refuges.

6. Clinical social work practice

Issues such as restrictive housing policies and affordable veterinary care can impact clients' decision-making and quality of life. Social workers should routinely be sensitive and supportive with clients who have pet-related problems, assist in locating pet care support services, and advocate for clients' pet-related interests.

Recognition, response and referral

Silverman (2018) identified four categories of animals that can expedite building rapport, enhance clients' motivation to attend sessions, and introduce human–animal awareness into all levels of professional social work, once clients are ready to accept pet-related intervention:

a. Service animals trained to do specific tasks for a client with a physical or sensory disability.
b. Therapy animals introduced in treatment plans with intentional, goal-directed activities to complement traditional interventions.
c. Emotional support animals, a newer and vaguer category, that provides emotional benefits to a person diagnosed with a mental health disorder that impairs or limits functioning in one or more life domains.
d. Comfort dogs calming survivors and first responders in disaster scenarios.

7. Public policy advocacy

The established role of social workers as social justice advocates provides opportunities to advance legislation that recognises both the beneficial aspects of pet ownership and the adverse effects of animal abuse on human wellbeing and safety. Animals are legally classified as property (Arkow & Lockwood, 2013), making them an underserved population long trivialised by legislators because human concerns are widely viewed as more important. Recognition that animal abuse is linked to human violence and that protecting animals also protects people is generating a new respect for animal welfare legislation.

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can advocate for public policy innovations:

a. Allowing courts to include pets in protection-from-abuse orders.

b. Allowing courts to award custody of pets in divorce settlements based upon the animals' best interests, similar to child custody provisions.
c. Redefining coercive-control animal abuse as also an act of domestic or dating violence.
d. Allowing courts to appoint pro bono advocates to represent animals in criminal cruelty cases.
e. Mandating or permitting child welfare, adult protection and SPCA agencies and veterinarians to cross-report suspected animal, elder and child abuse with immunity from civil and criminal liability and professional disciplinary sanctions.
f. Increasing penalties for bestiality based upon its links with child sexual abuse and child pornography.
g. Increasing criminal penalties for acts of animal cruelty committed in the presence of a minor.

8. Older populations

Human–animal bonds may be particularly robust with older clients and present unique challenges. For elders who are socially isolated or widowed, pets may be a unique source of companionship and emotional support and a last link to a deceased spouse; the death of a beloved pet may trigger profound grief, emotional trauma and depression (Boat & Knight, 2000). Caring for a pet may alleviate loneliness and improve mental health in older adults who live alone (Sanderson et al., 2024), be a preventive factor against suicide (Young et al., 2020) and be a strong motivator to get out of bed, have a daily routine, or go for a walk (Arkow, 2015).

Older, isolated individuals are over-represented among animal hoarders, who often exhibit mental health issues and self-neglect and live amid the hazards of neglected, diseased and dead animals. Animal hoarding cases are perplexing and problematic; a collaborative, multi-agency response is invariably required to address the wellbeing of the hoarder, human and animal dependants, property, and community (Patronek & Nathanson, 2009).

Animal neglect is common among older persons who lack financial resources, transportation, or physical or mental capacity to care for pets adequately (Peak et al., 2012). Self-neglect occurs among vulnerable adults who spend their limited financial resources on their animals' food and medications (Boat & Knight, 2000).

As in domestic violence, animals may become pawns in elder abuse when family members neglect or abuse the elder's pet as a form of control or retaliation, out of frustration over their caretaking responsibilities, or to extort financial assets from the victim (Humane Society of the US, 2005).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can help to develop, implement and manage programmes that keep pets with older adults with physical, cognitive or medical challenges (McLennan et al., 2022) by locating support services for their animals and making appropriate referrals including temporary foster care and other pet services for owners needing hospitalisation, assisted living, long-term healthcare or other social services. Social work input on multidisciplinary teams can help to resolve the challenging psychosocial aspects of animal hoarding.

Home health aides and other caregivers may be reluctant to enter seniors' dwellings if they fear aggressive animals or deteriorated environmental conditions linked with animal hoarding or neglect (Boat & Knight, 2000). Social workers can help facilitate these otherwise denied services by making referrals to appropriate agencies.

9. Pets and homeless populations

Individuals who are homeless or sleeping rough frequently have attachments to their animal companions stronger than those of the general population and keep pets,

primarily dogs, for emotional support, safety, a sense of responsibility, to combat loneliness, and to attract donations (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Irvine et al., 2012; Williams & Hogg, 2016). Most homeless shelters do not allow pets, deterring individuals from seeking essential shelter (O'Reilly-Jones, 2019).

Recognition, response and referral

Social workers can respond to the needs of homeless pet owners by coordinating veterinary and foster care and advocating for pet-friendly co-shelters similar to domestic violence shelters (Phillips, 2019). My Dog Is My Home, founded by social worker Christine Kim, advocates for co-sheltering pets with their people in homeless shelters. The Street Dog Coalition operates in 30 US states with social work, veterinary and medical school students hosting clinics and providing resources to help the pets of people who are homeless.

Conclusion

Progress has been made in bridging the PAWS gap and career opportunities in pet-inclusive social work are emerging, but additional steps must be taken. Incorporating companion animals into new definitions of "family" and "community" can improve delivery of services, identify clients' risk and resiliency factors, enhance social and environmental justice, and continue social work's legacy of facilitating collaborative community change. Social workers' capacity and willingness to recognise, respond and refer issues affecting clients' companion animals will be critical to this progress.

Inquiring about the presence (or absence), stability (or turbulence), attachments, dangerousness, history, and status of animals within clients' lives can provide more comprehensive family assessments, validate intra-familial relationships, gain earlier recognition of abusive behaviours, and address clients' animal care concerns with practical, appropriate and affordable solutions (Arkow, 2020).

An understanding of human–animal relationships is a valuable asset in social work practice. This can begin by including pets in family genograms and adding pet-inclusive coursework and field placement opportunities in schools of social work and continuing education. By addressing human–animal relationships and being aware of community resources that can resolve clients' animal-related concerns, social workers can be more effective in advancing social justice and preventing abuse of all vulnerable members of families and communities.

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Exploring the role of pets in social work research: Enhancing qualitative methods through the researcher-participant-pet dynamic

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Social work researchers engage with a diverse range of participants, stakeholders, and clients, many of whom share a deep bond with animals, particularly household pets. For example, in 2022, statistics revealed that 61% of Australian households and 64% of households in Aotearoa New Zealand owned a pet. To enhance their research, social workers are encouraged to adapt their skills in building rapport, demonstrating empathy, and employing critical questioning techniques to effectively connect with research participants. However, despite qualitative research training provided to emerging social workers, this training often overlooks the significance and opportunity of participants' relationships with their pets. This gap is significant as the context of research interactions is rapidly changing, with online and digital methods of data collection becoming more common in qualitative research. Connecting with pets can help social work researchers foster connection in challenging, and often disconnected, environments.

METHODS: Reflecting on research experiences and interview transcripts that involved interactions with pets, we explore how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process and can be used to facilitate deeper connections with research participants.

FINDINGS: Through examining these specific examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we emphasise the importance of recognising and incorporating pets as part of the research process.

CONCLUSIONS: If social work researchers aim to adopt a more inclusive approach encompassing the human-animal connection in their practice it is essential to integrate such perspectives in traditional research methods.

Keywords: Social work research, qualitative methods, researcher-participant-pet dynamic, human–animal connection, inclusive research practices

Traditional social work research often focuses on human relationships and interactions. The purpose of this focus has been to explore, navigate, and support people through complex social and structural situations. Despite this background, the inclusion of non-human animals into social work research and practice is gaining momentum. There is an emerging body of research that explores the role of animals in relation to the domains of attachment and wellbeing (Arkow, 2020; Chalmers et al., 2020; Riggs et al., 2024), the area of family violence (Taylor & Fraser, 2019), the relationship between

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the death of a pet and family dynamics (Turner, 2006), and in response to disaster management (Darroch & Adamson, 2016). In Aotearoa New Zealand, this growing recognition of including animals within the scope of social work can be seen in changes made to the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* (2019), which actively acknowledged the need to protect animals, and recognised their existence as sentient animals. In Australia, the recently updated Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) *Code of Ethics* included reference to animals in section 4.2: "commitment to social justice and human rights," and notes that social workers in Australia are required to "ensure that any animal engaged as part of social work is protected" (AASW, 2020, p. 13). While it is reassuring to see social work codes of ethics acknowledge the role and importance of animals, which has emerged alongside an increase of animal inclusive service programmes (Taylor et al., 2016), this does not mean that these codes and services are necessarily operating from an ethical basis, as these services include the potential of harm to animals, or position them as tools for the benefit of humans (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). However, this emerging attention to human–animal relationships and dynamics remains on the edge of social work practice and, in particular, social work research. Despite social work's commitment to person-in-environment models, these perspectives rarely include pets within the wider scope of a person's environment or systems (Duvnjak & Dent, 2023; Gant & Meadows, 2023; Turner, 2006).

Part of this reticence to include animals more broadly within the scope of social work research can be attributed to what has been described as a "pervasive humanism" that underpins the majority of social work perspectives, which has "normalised distinguishing between humans and other animals in a binary mode of thought" (Fraser & Taylor, 2024, p. 573). In response to this, animal studies, and more specifically critical animal studies, seeks to understand and resist the power differences between humans and animals, recognising them as situated within interconnected forms of oppression alongside humans (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Fraser and Taylor argued that critical animal studies—and more broadly the social work ambition of achieving social justice—advocates for the recognition of animals as having value regardless of the utility they provide to humans, and should be recognised as independent, sentient creatures of equal importance as humans (2024). This recognition needs to be incorporated within research spaces and environments in order to champion animal advocacy, as well as to fully capture the scope and complexity of human social lives. As Walker et al. (2015) stated, "social work is traditionally human-centred in practice, even though for many the bond between humans and animals is the most fundamental of daily-lived experiences" (p. 24), and social work research needs to include this fundamental relationship.

An important sub-domain of human and animal relationships, and one that has significant ramifications for incorporating the perspectives of critical animal studies in social work research, is the subject of companion animals, commonly called pets. Pets play an essential role in human–animal relationships, both for individuals and within families. They may act as companions, confidants, and attachment figures, contributing significantly to emotional wellbeing (McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Turner, 2006). Pets often become integral parts of support networks, promoting social connections, trust, and a sense of community (Wood et al., 2017). Similarly, the dynamics between humans and their pets within a household can reflect the overall wellbeing and security of the family members (Hoffer et al., 2018). Recent statistics show that 69% of Australian households and 64% of households in Aotearoa owned a pet (Animal Medicines Australia, 2022; Forrest et al., 2023). There is

a significant body of literature published on the positive impact of having a pet (Chalmers et al., 2020; Darroch & Adamson, 2016; Riggs et al., 2024), and there is also a developing acknowledgment of the practical components of including pets within the scope of social work and social work research. Arkow (2020) argued that asking about experiences with pets can help social workers explore risk and resilience factors, and that an assessment of a pet's physical condition and behaviours can provide insight into human experiences and functioning. Arkow provides six reasons why social workers—including social work researchers—should be mindful of human–animal relationships, which are:

- That a 21st century definition of "family" includes its non-human members as well.
- The presence of pets enhances communities' social capital.
- Actively asking about pets can build rapport and trust.
- Children's positive and negative experiences with animals can have lifelong implications.
- Animal abuse can reveal other forms of family violence.
- And pet loss can have significant implications for individual and family wellbeing (2020).

It is the notion that asking about pets can build rapport and trust that is central to this article. Focusing on the practitioner–client relationship, Arkow argued asking about animal-related experiences can provide important information to the practitioner, as well as establish a caring and trusting relationship between the practitioner and client (2015, 2020). The central idea behind this concept is that pets serve as channels for communication. A recurring idea in the literature is that pets act as "social lubricants", breaking the ice and fostering social support and interpersonal connections (Garrity & Stallones, 1998; Messent, 1983, p. 37). Research by Fawcett and Gullone (2001) indicated that even just observing animals can lower physiological responses to stressors and enhance positive mood. Additionally, studies such as that by Lange et al. (2006) have shown that animals can induce a calming effect, bring about stress-reducing humour, increase feelings of safety, evoke empathy, and boost motivation, particularly among adolescents. Arkow stated, "the inclusion of human–animal relationships should be considered more widely in training and practice as part of social work's commitment to social and environmental justice and fighting oppression and seen as an expanding opportunity for research, practice, advocacy, and advancing public policy" (2020, p. 584). We echo the sentiment that including human–animal relationships can enhance social work, specifically in how social work research is conducted.

While many studies published on human–animal relationships focus on the impact of pets on people, there is little published on how to include animals in the process of conducting research *with* people. A secondary data-analysis conducted by Ryan and Ziebland (2015) on the relationship between pets and health used 61 in-depth interviews conducted by other researchers. By returning to the interview video recordings, rather than the published outputs, they were able to explore the "sometimes three-way interactions, the co(a)gency, between participants, pets and researchers" (2015, p. 69). They found that the interactions with pets were frequently noted as interruptions in the transcripts, sometimes leading to a temporary pause in the recording. Pets were handled in various ways during interviews, and they were often physically removed from the setting by either the participant, another household member, or the researcher themselves. In transcripts, pets were often omitted and labelled with an interruption marker, while researchers sometimes displayed disinterest or considered them irrelevant to the process of interviewing the participant. Subsequently, pets received little mention in the analysis and documentation of findings (Ryan &

Ziebland, 2015). We believe that these interactions can be seen as an opportunity for deeper engagement with the research participants, rapport building within the data-collection process, and as a method to build genuine human (and animal) connection. However, we emphasise that this approach should not be utilitarian in nature, in that we do not see animals or pets as tools for building a more "successful" research project. Rather, it is a result of the broadening of social work's scope of practice to recognise animals and pets as part of social and family systems, and the inherent deep connections people share with their pets and companion animals (Walker et al., 2015).

To enhance their research, social work researchers are encouraged to adapt their skills in building rapport, demonstrating empathy, and employing critical questioning techniques to connect with participants. However, despite qualitative research training provided to emerging social workers and researchers, this training often overlooks the significance and opportunity of participants' relationships with their pets. This gap is significant as the context of research interactions is rapidly changing, with online and digital methods of data collection becoming more common in qualitative research (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). Connecting with, and building rapport through, pets can help social work researchers foster connection in challenging and often disconnected environments, while incorporating critical perspectives that challenge social work's traditional humanist perspectives. In this article we reflect on research experiences and interview transcripts that involved interactions with pets and explore how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process. By examining specific examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we emphasise the importance of recognising and incorporating the role of pets as an active and applied qualitative research skill.

Methodology

Research projects

The experiences and transcripts reflected on in this article are drawn from various research studies conducted over the last 8 years. None of these studies included pets or animals as a primary focus of the research design; however, all of these studies recorded interactions between the participants, their pets, and ourselves as researchers. These interactions were not initially used as data as they did not relate to the research questions, but the interactions prompted us to reflect on our methods and skills as researchers, and how they impacted our rapport building and connection with participants. The studies this material is drawn from include:

- A project exploring the relationship between social capital and wellbeing for older queer adults in Aotearoa New Zealand, which used face-to-face interviews to collect data.
- A project exploring the 2017 marriage equality postal survey in Australia, which used face-to-face interviews to collect data.
- A project examining social work practitioner competencies to work with older gender-diverse adults, which used interviews conducted via Zoom to collect data.
- A project that explored queer representation in young adult literature, which used focus groups conducted in-person and via Zoom to collect data.

Analysis

When we returned to the transcripts, we used a process of reflexive thematic analysis to examine our interactions with participants and their pets. Reflexive thematic analysis was an important process for re-engaging with this material, as we not only wanted to collate and organise patterns within the data, but we wanted to emphasise our experiences, reflections, and feelings as equally important elements

of the analytic process. Reflexive thematic analysis, following the work of Braun and Clarke (2019), emphasises research subjectivity, reflexivity, and the role researchers have in generating and creating knowledge, and therefore was well suited to examining our role in creating, establishing, and reflecting on the relationships built during the research process.

For the purposes of this article, we reviewed the transcripts that involved interactions with the participants' pets, identifying instances where: both participants and researchers would talk about the pets present at the time of the interview; pets would interact with either the participant or researcher; or when the presence of a pet would prompt either the participant or the researcher to talk about their own pets. Instances when participants would broadly discuss their pets—for example, talking about their household or daily activities—that did not result in a discussion or interaction were not included for analysis, as our focus was on the research-participant-pet dynamic.

After compiling this secondary dataset, we reviewed the extracts multiple times, developing themes from the observed interactions and our reflections on how they did, or did not, impact the research process. The extracts presented in the subsequent results section serve as examples, yet they do not reflect all the extracts identified within the secondary dataset.

Findings

Building rapport and connection

A primary theme that emerged from our reflexive analysis was the ability for the researcher-participant-pet dynamic to build rapport and connection within the research space. We anticipated a degree of connection from engaging with pets during the research process but encountered a surprising number of occasions where this resulted in ongoing conversation and connection with participants. This occurred commonly in face-to-face interviews, where we noted that many of our initial interactions focused on pets before beginning the formal interview process. One example, reflective of the many conversations included within the secondary dataset, showed how we inadvertently had a conversation about pets to relate to the participant:

> Participant: I go and house-sit and have a good time with their dog.
>
> David: What sort of dog is it?
>
> Participant: It's a King Charles Poodle. That's it. King Charles Spaniel Poodle, half and half. It's beautiful.
>
> David: Yeah. I love dogs. I've got two myself.
>
> Participant: What sort?
>
> David: A Dalmatian and a Beagle. Which make a very weird pairing. But they get on really well, so that's good.

We use the term, *inadvertently,* as this was not a deliberate strategy, nor did we see the pets as a tool that could be used within that space. Rather, it reflected our natural desire to engage with the participant's pets and share stories about our own, fostering a connection to the participant unrelated to the research questions or agenda. Another excerpt we identified illustrated this desire, and how it naturally occurred during our early engagement with the participant:

> David: Oh yep, brilliant [pause while participant makes tea 23.42 to 23.58]. Did you say Bruno was the dog's name? [discussion re dog's name 23.59 to 24.15]. Is he very old?
>
> Participant: No, about four or five.
>
> David: Oh yeah, that's a good age.

> Participant: Yeah, he's great company; I talk to him like he's a wee human. Cos I'm on my own most of the time.
>
> David: Well, I do the exact same thing with my dogs, I just talk to them all the time.
>
> Participant: Yeah. [to Bruno: What do you want? You're not going anywhere]. Right, I'll get that tea made, David. And coffee [pause/calls out to partner re coffee]. How do you like your tea, David?

Reflecting on these excerpts was an interesting process as a researcher. At the time, these interactions felt ordinary, comfortable, and natural. However, assessing these interactions in context, and examining how the rest of the interview proceeded, it became apparent that this trend of engaging with, and importantly being genuinely interested in, the participants' pets helped build a sense of connection and rapport, which facilitated an environment to engage with the more personal, sometimes sensitive, research questions. An additional consideration on this specific excerpt is that all of the interview recordings were transcribed by a professional transcription service. In line with Ryan and Ziebland's observation (2015), certain transcribers opted to sideline discussions pertaining to pets, deeming them less pertinent compared to other interview content. Initially, we paid little attention to this choice by the transcription service, as it did not align with our research focus. Yet, upon revisiting the secondary dataset and engaging with the literature on pets, it underscores a tendency of researchers and their affiliated services to marginalise or overlook pets in research contexts.

While many of the excerpts in the secondary dataset show examples of us willingly and happily engaging with the pets present during the interviews, others show examples where we were slightly less comfortable. One example occurred during an interview with a participant, where their small dog insisted on sitting on the researcher's lap during the interview. While it would be more than acceptable to ask for the dog to be removed from the space—as researchers did in the material analysed by Ryan and Ziebland (2015)—we made the decision to continue, and make the best of the situation:

> Participant: I'm sorry, is this okay?
>
> David: [Laughing] Yes of course, he's much smaller than mine. I love his little jumper, by the way.
>
> Participant: Oh, he needs it. Look at him. He's naked. No fur. Got ripped off by life. He got the David Bowie haircut too.
>
> David: It suits him though.
>
> Participant: Yeah, it does.
>
> **[…]**
>
> Participant: I think he's fallen asleep on you.
>
> David: [Speaking to the dog] Oh, dear. Oops, sorry I woke you up.

Part of this decision was a desire not to impose on either the participant or their pet, as it was their home and their environment, and we recognised that both had individual agency within that space. But equally this decision was an effort to show ourselves as willing to engage and be part of their world, which was required in order to conduct the research interview in a genuine manner. When analysing and reflecting on this excerpt in the context of looking at the researcher-participant-pet dynamic, kind and careful engagement with pets is important not just for general empathy, but to also build rapport and engagement—even in circumstances that are not ideal.

Connecting through devices

On the subject of connecting with participants in non-ideal circumstances,

a number of the research studies that contributed to the secondary data set included research interviews conducted via Zoom or over the phone. While both methods are widely used data-collection techniques, and have been used successfully for a long time, a lack of face-to-face interaction can hinder engagement and rapport with participants (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). This might be particularly true for social work researchers who are primarily trained in face-to-face interactions.

Reflecting on our own experiences conducting research via these mediums, we have personally found it harder to build that initial connection with participants. Part of this barrier is the limited opportunity for small-talk and observations about what is occurring around you, which naturally occurs when conducting interviews in-person or in people's homes. However, on occasion we found we had experiences where we could engage with the participant's pet via these mediums, and it helped us to connect through these various platforms.

One such example, which occurred in an interview via Zoom, allowed us to establish a connection early on with a participant, and establish a thread that was referred to a few times throughout the interview:

> Participant: Okay. I've still got the dogs though. Well, for a while anyway, for a while.
>
> David: How many dogs do you have?
>
> Participant: Two, both are rescues, we have a Caboodle, called Snoopy we've had for nine years. And Poppy, a Cavalier who was being thrown away by a breeder who said she wasn't worth feeding once she had stopped having multiple pup litters.
>
> David: That's really nice of you to adopt them.
>
> Participant: Oh, love them, love them. The best thing we ever did.
>
> David: I have a rescue cat around here somewhere, Gertrude, is her name.
>
> Participant: Gertrude B Stein.[1]
>
> David: Yeah, she's a very formal cat when she wants to be.
>
> Participant: Well cats can be very formal generally, I think. That's my experience of being a cat owner.
>
> […]
>
> Participant: I'm sorry the dog's knocked something off the sofa.
>
> David: Don't worry, I've got Gertie around my feet just attacking me. I get what it's like.
>
> Participant: Oh well, there you go, so between Gertie, Snoopy and Poppy...
>
> […]
>
> David: Thank you so much, it's been a pleasure, to talk to you today, and to hear your dogs in the background as well.
>
> Participant: Oh well, that's the little Cavalier, she's snoring at the moment.
>
> David: Well, I've got Gertie tearing up my couch here behind me so I'm going to have to tell her off.
>
> Participant: You go tell her off. Listen, go safe, stay safe and I look forward to hearing from you.

As minor as these interactions might seem, the back-and-forth exchange about our pets allowed us to connect and build common ground, creating the foundation for a genuine, in-depth research interview. When reflecting on this excerpt in the secondary dataset we compared it to the

other interviews from the same project, all of which utilised Zoom as well. Those other interviews, while for the most part successful, lacked the same level of connection and engagement. There are multiple factors that contribute to successful research-participant engagement over Zoom, including researcher skills, participant comfort levels, and suitable technology (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Tran et al., 2021; Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). On reflection, we found it helpful to bridge the digital divide by connecting with the human desire to talk about and share our pets. While this is only one element within a researcher's skillset, it should not be disregarded or downplayed in online data collection methods, especially as this is becoming an increasingly common form of data collection in social work research (McInroy, 2016).

Group connection and engagement in challenging circumstances

While the previous excerpts have focused on one-on-one interviews, conducted either in-person or via Zoom, our secondary dataset also included material from a study that utilised focus groups over Zoom to collect data. To provide context, this study focused on exploring queer representation in young adult literature and the impact of this representation on young adults. To conduct the study, we designed a project that used monthly focus groups modelled after book-clubs. The project was planned to run over eight months, and the initial plan was to conduct these focus groups in-person; however, due to Covid-19 restrictions, we were required to quickly pivot to online focus groups. We were concerned that this change, without the capacity for in-person interactions, would result in disengagement from the participants. However, we found that surprisingly, engagement levels increased. While this increase in engagement was likely due to a variety of factors, including increased participant comfort levels of being able to take part in their own home (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017), the participant's familiarity and skill-level using digital technology (Tran et al., 2021), and the pre-existing connections established between participants (Betts & Herb, 2023), we found that the sharing (and often active celebration) of our household pets proved to build group connection and engagement in the online focus groups.

Initially this process started as a method of breaking the ice and easing into the online focus group environment. After noticing the participants' pets in the background it quickly become a group rule that we should introduce our pets to the group:

> Annika: We can wait a minute for them to set up. Oh beautiful. Here they come now. Excellent. I see [Participant A's] gorgeous puppy dog in the background!
>
> Participant A: Sorry. He can't leave me alone.
>
> Annika: I give mine treats. I love seeing him there. Pets are always welcome.
>
> […]
>
> Participant B: Thank you very much. Also, David, what is the name of your cat?
>
> David: Gertrude.
>
> Participant C: God, I love it so much!
>
> Participant B: Thank you! Made my day.
>
> Participant D: Did not notice a cat. I love the cat!
>
> David: She's just keeping an eye on things.
>
> Annika: She can be the mascot of the group. I think I had similar reaction I think, [participant C] when your dog, I think it was, appeared in the screen. I saw [Participant B] had the same like, "What

> is it? Let me just have a quick look." So, pets are always appreciated.
>
> Participant C: Yeah. That's Mia. And funnily enough, we have a student in our school who's been Zooming lessons. And they have recently come out as non-binary and queer, which is really, really cool. And they are obsessed with Mia. Like every time they come on zoom, they're like "Where's Mia?" So, I go down and grab Mia, "here's Mia" and they want to like meet Mia. So, when we go back to school, I'm going to have to do some kind of like car park, meet the dog session or something and, and everything. So yeah. She's great. She's super moody. Like I mean, she's a Chihuahua, she's got tiny, tiny dog problems. But yeah, she's really great. Super cute.
>
> Annika: I'm just thinking how great all teaching would be, how much better it could be if we just add pets. Just that little addition, then it's perfect. Okay. Well, and that's obviously a very subtle hint to say, bring your pets along next time. Always happy to see them.

Interactions like this were common at each focus group, and helped build a sense of connection and relationship between the participants and ourselves. They also proved to create a more comfortable and relaxing space for the participants, in what otherwise might have felt like a disconnected environment. Another example from the secondary dataset illustrated the joy in sharing pets, and being exposed to other people's pets during the online focus groups:

> Annika: If you've got pets, I would really want to see. [Participant E] is summoning someone. Ooh, who've we got here? Ahh. Oh, I love a good cockatiel.
>
> Participant E: This is Hughie.
>
> Annika: Hi, Hughie!
>
> Participant E: The only reason that she can be out is because the dogs are currently in the lounge room with my partner.
>
> Annika: Nice. She can have some wholesome solo time outside of the cage, now.
>
> [Typed into the Zoom chat by another participant]:
>
> I would die for Hughie.

We also found that these regular interactions also served to help some participants feel comfortable opening up and sharing in the online focus groups. When we reflected on the difference between the few face-to-face sessions we had before we pivoted to Zoom, and the eventual Zoom groups and dynamics that were established, we noticed a number of the participants who rarely spoke in person were much more open and engaged in the online space. For some of these participants, the regular moments of sharing pets on their camera screens, and receiving numerous, often joyful declarations of praise from other participants, created a space where they could engage more openly, willingly, and with a sense of comfort, which we believe came from the researcher-participant-pet dynamics present in the online focus groups.

Lastly, one of the significant findings of our analysis of the secondary dataset was the impact of sharing and engaging with the participant's pets in creating a sense of group cohesion. While we have reflected on the ability of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic to create a sense of connection between ourselves as researchers and the participants, and to facilitate a greater sense of comfort and rapport with participants, the online focus groups demonstrated how this process strengthened the connection between participants themselves. Over the course of the project, we observed many interactions between participants that showed their growing sense of identity as a group. Part of this development occurred due to the nature

of discussing and sharing queer themes and ideas in an intimate setting, but we also noticed occasions where the inclusion of pets in the discussion demonstrated this bond in action. One such example, and one of our favourite excerpts from the secondary dataset, shows these group dynamics in action:

> Participant F: Yeah, I'll be right back. I just have to go get ... I'm looking after a baby possum. I'm an animal carer. So, I just have to go get them because I need to feed them. So, I'll be one second. Sorry. I'm really sorry.
>
> Annika: No, go for it.
>
> Participant F: Okay. Thanks.
>
> David: I really hope we get a chance to see this baby possum.
>
> Participant G: Yeah, definitely want to see the possum.
>
> Annika: Me too. Immediately I was like, "Can you just bring it back though?" Like I need to see this, especially if it's getting like a little bottle feed or something.
>
> [A few minutes later]
>
> Annika: Yeah. We're about to start chatting. Do you have a possum though? Is my really important question. Can we see it?
>
> Participant F: [Shows baby possum]
>
> Whole group: Oh!
>
> Participant F: Hang on. Wait, I'll turn you guys down. I've got you up really loud.
>
> Annika: Oh yeah.
>
> Participant G: We don't want to scare the baby.
>
> Participant F: Yeah. Okay. Now you can go.
>
> Whole group: [Softly] Oh...
>
> Participant G: He's a little baby.
>
> Participant F: He's an orphan. I've called him Ziggy, which isn't his name in the books, but his name is a horrible reference. So, I've called him Ziggy.
>
> Annika: Ziggy's good. I like Ziggy as a name.

When we were reflecting on the outcome of this research project, we were grateful that, throughout the 8-month long project, our participants decided to remain engaged, committed, and open to the research. We had anticipated a barrier to engagement and connection when we shifted to an online format, and expected to see a number of participants disengage from the project entirely. Instead, we witnessed an increased commitment in engagement, and saw a sense of group connection and cohesion develop between the participants. As previously stated, this sense of connection between research participants can emerge due to a variety of factors. However, our analysis of the secondary dataset leads us to believe that the researcher-participant-pet dynamic is significant in contributing to this and should be considered as a vital part of the research process.

Discussion and conclusion

Social work researchers are encouraged to strengthen their research skills by developing their ability to establish rapport, show empathy, and employ critical questioning techniques. However, despite receiving qualitative research training through undergraduate and post-graduate degrees (International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW], 2014), emerging social workers and researchers often overlook the importance and potential of participants' relationships with their pets (Walker et al., 2015). This oversight is notable as the landscape of research interactions is evolving

rapidly, with online and digital data-collection methods becoming increasingly prevalent in qualitative research (Tungohan & Catungal, 2022). Alongside these practical changes, social work as a profession is increasingly moving away from humanist perspectives that privilege the human experience over animals, and researchers need to be mindful to incorporate such critical perspectives in their research design and methods (Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Engaging with, and building rapport with, pets can assist social work researchers in both these goals, by establishing connections in challenging and often disconnected environments, while acknowledging the importance of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic within research spaces.

Drawing from research experiences and interview transcripts involving interactions with pets, we have explored how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic influences the research process. Through various examples, including in-person and online interviews, as well as Zoom focus groups, we have highlighted the significance of acknowledging and integrating the role of pets as a proactive and applied qualitative research skill.

The benefit of actively being aware of the research-participant-pet dynamic is significant for building qualitative research skills. Broadly, across contexts and environments, it has the capacity to increase participant engagement and rapport building. This can occur in face-to-face interviews, where researchers might be present in the homes or communities of the participant. The researcher-participant-pet dynamic in this context might involve interacting and engaging with the participants' pets if they are present and using this as an opportunity to share their own stories and experiences with pets. This process lends itself to establishing a personal bond, one that is not directly tied to the process of asking and responding to specific research questions. In the context of modern data-collection methods, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic also serves to support connection and rapport building in online and digital methods of data collection. Such methods are increasingly commonplace but do pose challenge for traditional engagement and rapport building (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2017; Tran et al., 2021). While not applicable in every circumstance, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can facilitate connection through the screen and digital environments. Further building on this benefit, the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can support participants to relax in research spaces that might prove daunting to some individuals, such as sharing personal stories or insights in group settings, and can help establish a sense of group cohesion, and facilitate long-term engagement with group-based research designs.

This consideration of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic also requires qualitative researchers to reconsider what is, and is not, considered as a form of data and research material. Often, transcripts and records of research interactions will omit the researcher-participant-pet dynamic if it is not seen as relevant to the assumed research question, reflecting the potential humanism that underpins traditional social work perspectives (Fraser & Taylor, 2024; Ryan and Ziebland, 2015), but we would argue that the inclusion of this material allows for a deeper analysis and reflection of how the researcher-participant-pet dynamic impacted the research process, interactions, and subsequent data. This inclusion allows qualitative researchers, including social work researchers, to be active in their acknowledgment of the role, importance, and place of pets, which is part of social workers commitment to the rights and responsibilities of animals in their practice (AASW, 2019; ANZASW, 2019).

Lastly, we want to end on a note of caution and restraint when it comes to approaching the idea of the researcher-participant-pet dynamic as specific tool. Throughout this

article we have argued that the researcher-participant-pet dynamic can be actively used by researchers to facilitate greater connection, engagement, and enhance the depth of data collected through the research process. But as Jones and Taylor noted, “simply positioning animals as entities to be studies risks objectifying them further” (2023, p. 33), and equally, simply viewing pets as a tool to gain access or connection to human participants risks objectifying and diminishing their role as companions, confidants, and attachment figures (McNicholas & Collis, 2006; Turner, 2006). Rather, in line with the ANZASW (2019) and AASW (2020) *Code of Ethics*, companion animals and pets should be recognised as sentient animals, protected under social work’s ethical and moral mandate, and an integral part of people’s family and social systems. The researcher-participant-pet dynamic, both as a research process and perspective, should be seen as method for recognising, valuing, and acknowledging the important role pets have in our lives, and as a method for advancing social work’s commitment to critical and inclusive practices.

Ethics

All the research studies reflected on in this article received approval from their respective university human research ethics committees to proceed in accordance with their university ethical guidelines. These guidelines allowed for extended consent, where the data collected could be used in projects and outputs that were considered as either extensions of the original project, or through the process of analysis resulted in the development of a new area of research inquiry.

Note: [1] A reference I evidently did not understand at the time.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Brushtail possums and species-inclusive social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: The distinction between pest control and cruelty blurs for brushtail possums in Aotearoa New Zealand. All members of society are encouraged to participate in possum pest control, which fosters a culture of potential cruelty. This article explores how social work can mitigate possum cruelty and promote a more species-inclusive approach through *actually-humane education.*

APPROACH: This article critiques the lack of concern social work has paid to the (mis)treatment of marginalised species of animals, using possums as a case study. As attitudes towards animals in Aotearoa New Zealand are complex, the intersection of concepts of *nativity*, *controllability*, and *worthiness* are examined in more detail. Green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care assist in how conservation education can interrogate what *humane* means in conservation, moving towards the concept of actually-humane education. Attitudes to species in Aotearoa New Zealand are influenced by how native, controllable, and worthy they are.

CONCLUSIONS: This article argues that conservation education, using green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care, can employ actually-humane forms of education. By critiquing the definition of humane and recognising the role of species belonging, actually-humane education can positively impact how animals are treated. In using this, social work can build towards a more socially just and species-inclusive conservation education that not only reduces abuse but engenders compassion and kindness in humans.

Keywords: Actually-humane education, green social work, compassion, violence, cruelty

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Aotearoa New Zealand is the worst place in the world to be a brushtail possum (herein: possum). They are described as "evil, habitat-destroying, bird-eating, Australian bastards. If you see a possum on the road, you run the little f***er over" (Poms Away, 2015, para. 1). Possums, who were introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand from their native Australia in 1858, are scapegoated as villains of the nation for their impacts on native species of flora and fauna, as well as their status as vectors of bovine tuberculosis (Bekoff, 2017; Potts et al., 2013). The species, along with rats and stoats, are targets of eradication campaigns like "Predator Free 2050" (Department of Conservation, n.d.). To achieve this, governmental campaigns and organisations encourage every member of society to participate in the removal of these pests. As such, children are recruited to engage in the hunting, trapping, and baiting of possums through school and community-sanctioned events. These activities normalise

and desensitise young children to extreme forms of cruelty and violence, for which their participation is rewarded.

This culture of desensitisation poses a grave concern for children's healthy development of empathy and has significant ramifications for the future of social work in Aotearoa New Zealand. While existing research has investigated abuse of non-human animals, the focus is normally reserved for companion species and ignores non-domesticated animals (Taylor & Signal, 2009), especially so-called pest species. Previous research has more been to understand how the prevalence of abuse can have grave impacts on children's empathy development (Arluke et al., 1999; Flynn, 2012) and not so much for the inherent experience of the animals themselves. The unique hatred of possums positions them as exceptions to the rule, creating a grey space where cruelty to possums is ignored or often not even considered as cruelty.

Attitudes to animals in Aotearoa New Zealand can be illustrated through the intersection of three overarching human-defined values: nativity (i.e., species not introduced by humans and deemed to 'naturally' belong in a particular place), controllability (i.e., ease of controlling a species, whether through physical containment, habitat modification, or selective breeding, for example), and worthiness (i.e., perceived value to human beings and extent to which they are morally considered by humans). These anthropocentric values play a central role in the vilification of possums and have isolated them from receiving appropriate consideration in conservation (Major, 2023). For possums, the intersection of being non-native, difficult to control, and morally unworthy puts them at risk of maltreatment and cruelty. To counter this, green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care can encourage actually-humane forms of education in both social work practice and policy. The implications of this not only ensure more ethical treatment for possums but also assist children with a healthier growth of empathy that can benefit both the human and non-human members of society.

Before continuing, several terms are important to discuss. Introduced previously, "actually-humane education" refers to the intentional interrogation of what is deemed to be humane treatment of non-human animals in conservation education. "Pest", with intentional apostrophes, is deliberately written this way to recognise the social and cultural construction of the word. The term, *animals*, also specifically refers to non-human animals; however, this lexical designation is recognisably lacking as humans are animals and placing a boundary between the two further reinforces the human/non-human binary. It is also relevant to specify this upcoming discussion critiques *mainstream* Pākehā (New Zealander of European descent) attitudes to possums and conservation, not the indigenous Māori or Moriori perspectives, which are markedly different. Referencing Pākehā attitudes as mainstream does not diminish the relevance and importance of Māori perspectives but recognises the colonial dominance of these attitudes.

Social work and animals

Social work focuses on meeting the diverse needs of human beings, their communities, and wider society (Segal et al., 2004). It aims to empower individuals and strengthen their wellbeing by proactively addressing factors such as discrimination, marginalisation, oppression, violence, inequality, and social injustice. Social justice is a core tenet of social work as it considers the impacts of, and solutions for, institutional oppression and domination. This is poignant as oppression and domination are what breed social injustice in the first place (Young, 2014).

Non-human animals are often ignored in this discussion; however, if they *are* discussed, the concern is normally relegated only to certain species, such as companion animals or those used as instruments for animal-assisted therapy (Taylor et al., 2014). They are valued more for the benefits they offer humans than for who they are as distinct individuals. The consideration of animals as more than just

companions or resources is not typical in mainstream social work.

This mainstream perspective regards the human–animal bond as "lightweight, cliché, or sentimental" and not "substantial" enough (Emmens, 2007, p. 9); however, scholars have begun to critique anthropocentrism within social work (Bozalek & Pease, 2020; Fraser & Taylor, 2024). This is reinforced by the Cartesian dichotomy of separating humans from animals (Dupre, 2002), whereby animals are used as tools for human therapy without considering they have needs and desires of their own (Taylor et al., 2014). This humanist approach, where human issues are seen as the only kind of social issues (Payne, 2011), is deficient, especially for a field that seeks to be intersectional to reduce oppression and nurture empathy (Bell, 2020; Fraser & Taylor, 2024). Currently, animal rights within social work are peripheral concepts, though species-inclusive scholarship is increasing (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013, 2014; Taylor et al., 2020).

The anti-oppressive value system that social work seeks to emulate often ignores the role of species in oppression, discrimination, and violence (Silberberg, 2023). This deficit stems not only from attitudes that position humans as superior to animals but is compounded by the lack of social work training and education which rarely considers animals as individual victims that need consideration (Hanrahan, 2011; Risley-Curtiss, 2010). This argument is not to further criticise or strain an already under-resourced profession but contends that mainstream social work is missing an important aspect of oppression by not considering animals (Wolf, 2000).

Social work has a social and moral obligation to consider invisibilised and underserved groups in society, including non-human animals (Witkin, 1998; Wolf, 2000). Matsuoka and Sorenson (2014) detailed four developments in human–animal relations that justify this, such as the introduction of animals in social work (i.e., using animals in therapy or interventions), the recognition of "the link" (i.e., where violence to animals is connected to violence to humans), the increased understanding of animal capabilities (i.e., animals' social, cognitive, and emotional experiences are now better understood), and the emergence of the animal rights movement which has further developed theories about marginalisation, oppression, and social justice to all living beings. They note the role of speciesism, which is species-based discrimination (Ryder, 2010; Singer, 1975), in social work, where people who are social justice advocates against discrimination only extend this consideration to human animals and not non-human animals within society (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). This is reflected in the various codes of ethics for social work associations that outline their priorities based on what they emphasise and, more interestingly, what they do not.

There are differences in how social work approaches animals depending on context (Andrews, 2019; Graham et al., 2012); however, there are similarities across social work organisations. For example, the United States National Association for Social Work (NASW) excludes animals from their code of ethics, which Silberberg (2023) argued is the "antithesis of the very principles that guide the NASW and the profession at large" (p. 74). While animal abuse is a concern for the profession, the distinction is more on the presence of what that cruelty signifies about humans rather than the animals themselves experiencing cruelty (Chalmers et al., 2020). The code of ethics for the Australian Association for Social Work only notes that "an animal engaged as part of social work practice is protected" (AASW, 2020, p. 13). Similarly, the latest Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers code of ethics noted that they "recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected" (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). Neither stated what 'protected' or 'engaged' means, though the latter acknowledges animals are sentient; however, recognition of this does not assure compassionate treatment.

This was not always the case. Early social work connected the issues of abused children and animal welfare (LeBow & Cherney, 2015), with several organisations at the time recognising the connection between protecting both groups (Faver & Strand, 2008). Theorists argued that how people treat animals is indicative of how they can, by extension, treat human beings. The potential for abuse to animals to indicate abuse to humans is a concept colloquially known as "the link" (Ascione, 1993, 2008; Beirne, 1995). While the strength and effectiveness of the link are debated, evidence suggests that the exploitation and abuse of animals relate to the exploitation and abuse of humans (Adams & Donovan, 1995; Nibert, 2013).

We know that animals suffer—so why is social work not imminently concerned with preventing and ceasing their suffering? This question is peculiar as social work aims to promote social justice for vulnerable populations, and animals have been argued to be the most vulnerable individuals in society (Ryan, 2014; Satz, 2017). Animals exist within anthropocentric structures that benefit from their exploitation, though they are ascribed little to no agency or voice. Ignoring this suffering of animals reduces our ability to be compassionate (Faver & Strand, 2008). Until mainstream social work stops valuing animals as instruments, it will be difficult to consider them as individuals with their own rights and considerations. If considerations are made, it may not be for the animal victim per se, but more about the wellbeing of the (human) person who engages in this cruel behaviour, the (human) victims, and to consider the wider impacts on (human) society. For Wolf (2000), social workers ought to consider animals, not only for the profession and the people they serve, but for the animals themselves as members of society.

This vein of anthropocentrism is creating a blind spot for which cruelty and violence are left unchecked. This not only harms possums, who, as will be detailed in the case study below, are victims experiencing cruelty in the name of conservation but can also impact people who are being taught that care and compassion are context- and species-specific. Knowing that violence against animals is connected to violence against humans, we need to be concerned with how members of society treat animals—regardless of species or status. Animals are not normally considered, in social work at least, as a part of this social milieu (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). However, animals are inextricably bound to human societies, whether they wish to be or not, and are key subjects within these societies. Their absence in these discussions reinforces that their interests, rights, and considerations are not important or relevant (Ryan, 2011). However, Regan (2004) argued that "what happens to [animals] matters to them" (p. xvi), which is one of the core reasons why social work should care about these beings who are *subjects of lives*.

The following case study discusses why social work should care about the treatment of pests in Aotearoa New Zealand. The arguments are heavily influenced by Critical Animal Studies (CAS), which aims to remove all forms of oppression and domination for all living beings (Nocella et al., 2014). CAS builds upon the idea that social work must consider every species of animal if the field truly wishes to target the systemic nature of oppression. Social work has a moral and social responsibility to assist in alleviating cruelty towards possums by advocating for more humane forms of education. This education can be supported by green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care to benefit both humans *and* possums as members of New Zealand's society.

Animals in Aotearoa New Zealand: Where being 'cute' isn't enough

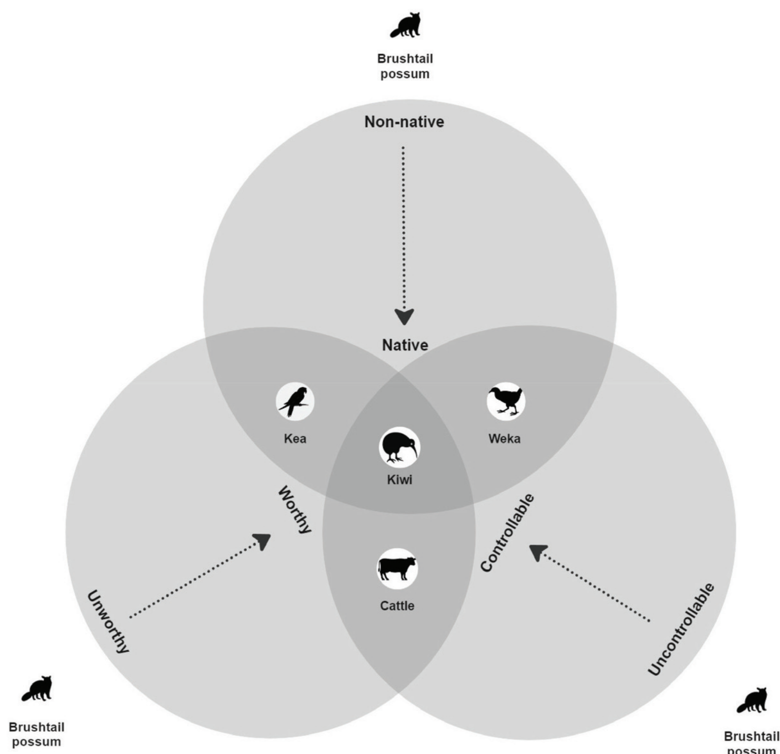
A society's relationships with, and subsequent treatment of, animals are historically situated (Cudworth, 2011). The attitudes towards animals are contextually bound to place, identity, and belonging (Philo & Wilbert, 2004; Urbanik, 2012). This concept is particularly pronounced for both native and introduced species in Aotearoa New Zealand. For many

New Zealanders (particularly Pākehā), their relationships with animals depend on the species and whether that species belongs which is decided through a consideration of their usefulness, controllability, and nativity (Major, 2023).

The landmass that would eventually become Aotearoa New Zealand was one of the few places on Earth known as a bird's paradise as it was almost entirely mammal-free before human settlement. The arrival of humans radically changed the environment through a series of intentional and unintentional introductions of foreign species. Some species, such as cattle and sheep, were introduced by settlers for their contribution to the nation's primary industries. Other species, such as rabbits and possums, were also deliberately introduced to create fur industries (King & Forsyth, 2021). While initial attitudes towards these species were favourable, they flourished without predators and became pests as they competed with native species. Some species are liminal depending on their status. For example, domestic cats are fiercely protected as family members and companion animals, whilst feral or wild cats are persecuted as pests (Farnworth et al., 2010; Palmer & Thomas, 2023).

Acceptance for a species depends on the intersection of nativity, controllability, and worthiness. Species that are deemed worthy and are easy to control can be given social licence to exist in Aotearoa New Zealand, regardless of their nativity status; however, if a species is difficult to control and considered not worthy, they are at risk of maltreatment. To illustrate the complexity of species belonging, a diagram was created for this paper to show the consequences of these three anthropocentrically defined (Pākehā) values in a New Zealand context (see Figure 1). As the definitions of *value*, *worth*, *controllable*, or even *native* are subject to perspective, this diagram may change.

Figure 1: Species Belonging Diagram



The most revered species in Aotearoa New Zealand are those who inhabit the centre of this diagram, where they are native, controllable, and worthy (such as kiwi). The species most despised are those on the periphery, where they are non-native, difficult to control, and not worthy (i.e., possums). Kiwi are unique tokens of rarity, which offers them inherent worth, but as flightless birds, they are also easily controllable. Their behaviour fits within society's expectations without becoming too much of a nuisance as other native birds can be, such as weka. Flightless weka are controllable, but their omnivorous diets and cheeky behaviour can make them less socially valuable. Belonging depends on whether the species is also controllable and adds (rather than detracts) value. While native status would assume the species has some inherent worth, there are some species, such as kea, which can be difficult to control and can be seen as pestilent depending on context. These species, based on their positioning in the diagram, are favoured less in society than kiwi.

Ultimately, belonging hinges on being controllable *and* valuable, with nativity status being an extra, but not necessary, benefit. For instance, sheep and cattle, vital to New Zealand's economy and pastoral identity (Potts et al., 2013), are easily controlled and valuable due to their role in agriculture. For them, being non-native does not preclude them from being seen positively in society. This positive attitude is anthropocentric and does not mean they are seen as subjective beings that are treated with compassion or empathy; rather, it points to their (lack of) social status and objectification. Other introduced species, such as possums, are treated differently as they are not as easily controllable—even if they hold some potential value (for example, their fur or flesh). Species like these that lie outside the accepted parameters are at increased risk of mistreatment and cruelty as social concern for them dissipates.

Possums exist outside the spheres of belonging for most New Zealanders. While they are valuable as a resource, they are not easily controllable. This combination, along with their status as vectors of bovine tuberculosis (which can potentially decimate Aotearoa New Zealand's beef and dairy industries), has relegated possums as pests, with government-sanctioned campaigns seeking to eradicate them by 2050. These sociocultural attitudes have led some people in Aotearoa New Zealand's society to treat them with cruelty as possums are culturally positioned as *anti-animals*—animals who are framed in opposition to nature, rather than being a part of it (Holm, 2015). For possums, who are charismatic mammals with large eyes and traditionally cute features, being cute is not enough to overcome the hatred and cruelty towards them.

Animal cruelty is defined as "socially unacceptable behavior that intentionally causes unnecessary pain, suffering, or distress to and/or the death of an animal" (Ascione, 1999, p. 51). However, cruelty to possums is framed as *not* cruelty, rather, cruel behaviour toward them is justified as a necessity for native species protection (Major, 2023). While not every person who believes in conserving and protecting native species will participate and rejoice in cruelty, there is increasing research that demonstrates those who do are individually at risk and, furthermore, that acceptance of these cruel behaviours also poses a risk for our societies more generally (SPCA LA, n.d.). For example, children who are raised to see "pest" animals as less-than will be more likely to engage in behaviours that would otherwise be seen as unacceptable if the animal in question were another species (McGuire et al., 2023). Unfortunately, there is little research on whether "pest" status correlates to increased abuse. This gap does not mean abuse does not occur, but suggests it is currently not a research priority.

Animal abuse (and the subsequent link to human abuse) in New Zealand was first identified in social work literature in 2012 (Roguski, 2012; Walker et al., 2015); however, the research is more concerned about the

abuse being an indicator of potential harm to humans. Animals, and their mistreatment, are relevant for social work given the connections between animal abuse and human abuse. Aotearoa New Zealand has the highest rate of family violence in the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) and animals are often weaponised as pawns in these abusive environments (Jury et al., 2018). Social work must address this moral imperative to combat cruelty and social malaise, extending its concern beyond pets to all animals—including pests.

Previous research and social commentaries have critiqued current approaches used in the name of "conservation" (Potts, 2009; Souther, 2016; Tulloch, 2018), such as the hunting and trapping "Predator Blitzes" (Auckland Council, 2017), school fundraising events, like the "Marsupial Madness Challenge" (James, 2023), and "pest"-hunting playgroups for preschoolers (Wise, 2023). These activities often include young children, their families, and wider community members to participate in hunting and trapping contests with prize categories such has the heaviest "pest" caught, highest number caught, and top hunters under specific ages (Paparoa School, 2023). For example, the North Canterbury Kids Hunt (2024) has three age groups of top hunters (under 6, under 11, and under 16), with prize values up to $350 per winner. These events are often considered community bonding exercises and are framed in the media as "all fur good cause" (*Bay of Plenty Times*, n.d., title). This use of puns is a prime example of how dark humour and misinformation are used in the media to justify the mistreatment of possums, which occurs with little to no consideration of how possums are being framed as villainous pests and the cruelty they sustain is problematic (Major, 2024). This has resulted in reports of events and activities that desecrate possums and their bodies in ways that are disrespectful and cruel, such as dead possum dress-up competitions (McQueeney, 2012) and possum-throwing contests (South, 2010; Tulloch, 2018). These events encourage community members, including children, to combine "pest" control with the winning of prizes, which may further gamify violence if not enough care is taken. These children, while being taught about gun safety and safe trapping, are not often learning about the importance of being respectful and kind to the targeted animals. While some organisations and community hunts are now including statements that killing should be "humane" (North Canterbury Kids Hunt, 2024), there is no description of what humane refers to and suggests the inclusion is more a box-ticking exercise.

This normalisation and desensitisation to violence has led some children to participate in cruelty disguised as conservation (Tulloch, 2018). For example, teenagers at Drury School's possum hunt were witnessed drowning joeys in a bucket of water after they were removed from their dead mothers (Tulloch, 2017). Drury School was initially insistent that the joeys were not deliberately harmed, but have since agreed to work with the SPCA to ensure "animal welfare requirements are met in future so that the focus is returned to the commendable intent of the fundraising itself" (Nightingale, 2017, para. 11). These events oversimplify conservation by teaching who is "good" (i.e., the humans and the native species being protected) and who is "bad" (i.e., the possums, stoats, and rats who deserve to die) (Morris, 2022).

The following section details why social work should care about possums and discusses some practical and theoretical steps forward that are informed by green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care.

Possums, actually-humane education, and new social work approaches

Given the increasing evidence that cruelty to animals is individually and societally imperative it is important that social work consider other animals. This consideration must also include the treatment of pests who

are often victims of some of the worst kinds of socially sanctioned cruelty.

The gamification of conservation, where the human is the superhero against the villainous possum and prizes are given for winning (i.e., killing), engages children in conservation education, despite it posing serious ethical concerns for the field of social work (Willing, 2022). The compartmentalisation of who is good or bad can have discernible differences in treatment towards a species, "pest" or not. The possum has been aptly described as "the poster child for abused introduced species" (SAFE, 2024, para. 6). Conservation education should employ "actually-humane education" (Major, 2023). Inspired by Muller and McNeill's (2021) "actually-autistic" CAS discourse, actually-humane education is a dedicated form of anti-speciesist praxis that critiques and improves upon existing humane education and considers the role of both positive empathy and compassion in making education *actually*-humane. This approach, which is theoretical at this stage, seeks to clarify what humane means in the context of animals and their rights and aims to produce tangible, socially just outcomes of compassion and empathy in those who participate in these initiatives.

The importance of this to social work is paramount as social workers are likely to encounter people who exhibit violent social behaviours such as animal abuse. Abuse can be directed towards any species, though the social responses to this cruelty are often species-specific. This narrative reinforces certain beings, such as possums, are less deserving of compassionate and kind treatment because of their species membership. This bias operates much like how abuse and mistreatment are, or have been, taught about race, sex, age, or dis/ability. These statements do not mean that every person who engages in conservation will act with deliberate cruelty; however, they signify that a social hierarchy imbued with speciesism can allow cruelty to fall under the radar.

Actually-humane education supports anti-speciesist thinking to critically consider what humane means in an educational context, moving away from forms of education that are purely motivated by andro- and human-centric ideals. Current approaches humane-wash their marketing so these activities appear more considerate for the targeted animals than they actually are. For example, a biodiversity research report that investigated the humaneness of "pest" control in Aotearoa New Zealand referred to "relative welfare impacts" rather than "humaneness" as they recognised "truly humane control methods are rare" (Landcare Research, 2010, pp. 2,4), though they fail to delve into the moral and ethical implications of disregarding these methods.

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand has already started to recognise the importance of training frontline social workers to recognise cruelty to animals as a predictor of deviance and potential cruelty to humans (Gullone, 2014; Roguski, 2012). Abuse towards any being is an explicit demonstration of power, dominance, and control (Gullone, 2014). Many instances of animal cruelty in social work literature exclusively highlight abuse towards animals within the family unit, such as cats or dogs (Faver & Strand, 2008; Risley-Curtiss, 2010). These companion animals are statistically the most often abused, though this could be due to their proximity to the home (Bègue, 2022). This closeness can also mean that abuse of companion animals is treated as more serious than abuse of wild animals, for example (Wong, 2023). The danger of this specific example is that the abuse of possums is constructed as necessary—and is therefore normalised—for conservation.

Cultures around the world favour certain species over others, signalling a blind spot where cruelty can be given a pass if the species is despised enough. In Aotearoa New Zealand, there are some exceptions to this rule in extreme cases of possum cruelty. For instance, in 2018, a video was shared on social media of a Waimate man violently punching

a possum off a fence while his friends cheered him on. Some local commentaries posed the question of whether the video was "animal cruelty or simply a case of "pest" control" (Leahy, 2018, para. 5). At the time, the national and international backlash was immediate, claiming this treatment was undoubtedly cruel; however, more casual forms of cruelty to possums are socially sanctioned and not responded to in the same way. Out of curiosity, I followed up with the SPCA to inquire about whether anyone was subsequently charged with animal cruelty in the Waimate case. Unfortunately, no one was found or prosecuted despite it being filmed. The fact the animal was a possum likely played a role in the silence that protected the abuser from facing prosecution in either the legal or public courts of justice. Countering this requires collaboration to support actually-humane education which nurtures empathy, compassion, and kindness in society. There are several approaches, such as green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care which can be beneficial in supporting the integration of actually-humane education in social work.

Green social work and (eco)feminist ethic of care

"Green social work", which has also been called "environmental social work" (Dominelli, 2012; Teixeira & Krings, 2018), recognises how the environment plays a central role in social wellbeing and health (Dominelli, 2018). The increasing degradation of the natural environment and accelerated rate of climate change is causing increased strain and pressure on communities, particularly those who are vulnerable or marginalised as they are the first to feel the effects. Social work theorists argue that ecological impacts on communities should also be considered if social work aims to evolve with the changing planet and social needs (Gray et al., 2012; Shaw, 2013). This *environmental turn* for social work is not necessarily a new concept, though the inclusion of animals and their rights (i.e., an *animal turn*), has yet to perforate mainstream discussions of green social work. A significant amount of the green social work material is human-centric (Dominelli, 2012). Animals are often excluded in social work research unless the information is coming from intersectional scholars who already recognise animals as sentient beings that are a part of the fabric of society (Walker et al., 2015). Given animals—regardless of their species—are members of society and are impacted by changes in the environment, they should inherently be included in social work and its green initiatives.

An ecofeminist ethic of care can also be beneficial for social work and actually-humane education. A feminist ethic of care prioritises emotion in how we approach animal ethics and questions how oppression, domination, and exploitation are influenced and supported by androcentric values from the patriarchy (Donovan & Adams, 2007). Adams and Donovan (1995) previously argued that the domination of women was modelled after the domination of animals, so this connection between feminism and speciesism is important to investigate further. My intentional reference here to an *eco*feminist ethic of care—rather than just a feminist ethic of care—is to explicitly consider how care should consider more than just gender. Ecofeminists prioritise contextual relationships and emotions (a feminine approach) over abstract reasoning and logic (i.e., a masculine approach). They recognise how patriarchy and speciesism are social systems which are set up to favour men through the exploitation of women and nature (Giacomini et al., 2018). The intersectional approach of combining feminism and the environment assists with addressing social work's key objective of targeting oppression.

Fraser and Taylor (2024) argued that incorporating a feminist ethic of care into social work can offer a wider framework to examine social justice and ethics. While Fraser and Taylor did not specify an *eco*feminist ethic of care for social work, the environment undoubtedly plays a fundamental role in the facilitation of oppression, exploitation, and domination, and is thus crucial to consider. These values of care and emotion can be treated as inferior to reason and logic

where the human is the primary focus. The profession needs to consider how to pivot to become species-inclusive rather than species-exclusive social work (Fraser & Taylor, 2020, 2024). Matsuoka and Sorenson (2014) argued:

> Animal issues are not simply sentimental concerns … they are political-economic matters fundamental to the most pressing social issues ... social justice cannot be achieved without addressing institutional contexts that perpetuate systemic oppression: that is addressing trans-species social justice. (p. 76)

Trans-species social justice is defined as "consideration of interests of all animals (including humans) in order to achieve institutional conditions free from oppression and domination" (Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014, p. 70). These ideas hinge on being intersectional. Theorised initially by American law professor, Kimberlé Crenshaw (2005), intersectionality recognises how oppressions can overlap to create new forms of domination and exploitation. While Crenshaw wrote about the intersection between sexism and racism, the role of species can also be used for countering oppression imposed on marginalised groups. Moving forward to encompass trans-species social justice, social work ought to "encourage its students, educators, scholars, and practitioners to become informed about environmental, political, and economic issues connected with treatment of animals" (Wolf, 2000, p. 91). This discussion should not prioritise specific species of animals, but consider all species, including marginalised species like possums. Only until then can social work continue to target the very nature of oppression.

Conclusion

Social work has traditionally prioritised social justice for society, where *society* typically refers to human beings. However, animals are just as much a part of society as humans—and given this, they should also be considered within the objectives of social work. This article explored social work within Aotearoa New Zealand and argued that species-inclusivity is required if social work truly seeks to reduce societal oppression and cruelty. Possums, who are pests to the nation for their threat to primary industries and perceived impacts on flora and fauna, were introduced as a case study to illustrate how cruelty can be disguised as "pest" control. There are concerning impacts on the field of social work if the abuse of animals deemed to not belong is left unabated. To articulate species belonging, a diagram was created that illustrates three intersecting values: nativity, controllability, and worthiness. The consequences of these human-defined values are dire for possums as they are not only non-native, but they are difficult to control and are largely deemed unworthy by mainstream society. This juncture can foster a culture of cruelty that is enacted in the name of conservation. To address this, actually-humane education, which seeks to critique the definition of humane, is a possibility that should be considered. Actually-humane education can benefit from the incorporation of green social work and an ecofeminist ethic of care as these approaches offer proactive solutions for engendering empathy and compassion which can benefit, not only possums, but individual people and wider society.

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Dogs in schools: Dogs Connect as an example of a dogs-first wellbeing dog programme

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Dogs may be loved in Australia, but they are still placed precariously in human society, including when they work as wellbeing dogs in schools.

APPROACH: In this commentary, we explore through a case study of Dogs Connect, the importance of placing the dogs at the centre of our thinking and using positive training methods so as to enable the dogs, not just the students to flourish. As we will explain, "alpha dog or pack leader" narratives are now discredited and should not be used. Instead, policies and procedures need to be written to enshrine the rights of dogs working in all canine programmes, including when they provide emotional and social support to school pupils in busy educational settings.

IMPLICATIONS: We suggest some practical guidelines for planning for, and implementing, wellbeing dog programmes in schools and talk about how school social workers might lend their support.

Keywords: Dogs in social work, dogs-first school programmes, dogs in schools, centring dogs in animal-assisted interventions, animal labour, dogs in therapy

The presence of dogs in schools and community environments for various animal assisted intervention (AAI) roles ("therapy dogs" or "wellbeing dogs") has become increasingly popular, notably for their therapeutic value for children and strengthening the work of social workers and counsellors in education settings. More generally, dogs offer emotional support and help reduce stress levels amongst students. They may provide social support, promote a sense of belonging, reduce stress and anxiety, and even facilitate learning by simply being present (Henderson et al., 2020; Jalongo, 2018; Kirnan & Ventresco, 2018). Carlyle and Graham (2019) suggested that dog–human encounters contribute to multi-species wellbeing by creating vital spaces for affect attunement. The presence of dogs can provide comfort during challenging situations and provide cross-species mutual aid. Studies also show that dogs can improve social interactions and communication skills amongst students (Verhoeven et al., 2023), which not only fosters empathy but also enhances interpersonal relationships within the school community. Furthermore, dogs can elevate communication skills among children who may struggle with verbal expression (Karpoutzaki et al., 2023).

The benefits do not stop there. Research has also shown that the presence of dogs in classrooms can positively influence attendance rates among students by creating a positive learning environment

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that encourages students to come to school regularly (Sorin et al., 2015). Moreover, engaging with dogs promotes responsibility and empathy amongst students, fostering a sense of accountability while also enhancing social skills (Keppens et al., 2019), thus enriching Humane Education programmes, which are designed to instil core principles that all animals are valuable and deserve to be treated with respect.

However, it is abundantly clear that these studies all focus on the human benefits of dogs on the people with whom they interact, whilst many of these programmes may be potentially problematic for dogs. For instance, such programmes may emphasise human comfort and safety while neglecting the dogs' freedom to choose, their agency, or their levels of comfort. And no matter how tolerant a dog may be, this is not a fair position for any dog. So while the literature supports the benefits of therapy dogs on humans, there is little to support how these programmes can best serve dogs. We hope to shed light on the importance of centring the wellbeing of dogs who are ultimately working to support the wellbeing of others and by identifying gaps in the literature about canine wellbeing in any type of AAI.

Some of these anthropocentric misgivings are borne from the fallacy of outdated training methodologies, including the misguidance of a "dominance theory" rhetoric (van der Borg et al., 2015) that is a pervasive methodology for teaching dogs. Dominance theory suggests that a rank reduction technique is needed to maintain a dogs' submissiveness or reduce their dominant nature, placing humans in a greater position of power over them (Friedman & Brinker, 2001). This may include various techniques of training and interacting with therapy dogs that rely on fear or intimidation to disempower them, commanding their compliance and obedient behaviour regardless of their feelings or emotional experiences. It can also inform everyday interactions that may reduce choice and agency and create an expected level of compliance from dogs when being handled or touched. However, this theory has not only been debunked but based on our current understanding of canine ethology and behaviour, it is also harmful to their wellbeing (for e.g., Jones, 2022). Generally, these methods not only reduce the dog's agency, but also increase the likelihood of defensive behaviours (Ziv, 2017). Sadly, when a dog feels unsafe and devoid of genuine choice, they are more likely to elevate their communication level to more overt behaviours such as growling, snapping, snarling, or even biting. And for that, their risk of rehoming or euthanisation increases.

Another peril is the dearth of knowledge about dog communication and species-specific behaviour amongst the general population, including teachers, social workers, practitioners and community members (Walsh et al., 2024). Though dogs in classrooms and therapeutic contexts provide a great opportunity for children and adults to learn how dogs communicate, often their behaviours are misinterpreted or missed altogether. Risley-Curtiss et al. (2013) found that the social workers in the United States who involve animals as part of their intervention strategies, largely do so without adequate education and/or training. A Canadian study by Hanrahan et al. (2013) also indicated a lack of awareness in social work practice about the human–animal bond (HAB) or its potential for mutual reciprocity. One of the main contributions of these findings is that there is a scarcity of social work literature that attempts to consider the perspectives or experiences of animals involved in social work practice and little support for practitioners. And of the therapy dog programmes that operate, many generally do not focus on dog behaviour or canine emotionality, leaving dogs vulnerable to being used for their utility value (McDowell et al., 2023). And in many cases, the scarcity of a learned cross-species communication system means there is no ability for the dog to control what is

happening to them, leaving them vulnerable to non-consensual touching, coercion, or forced encounters, particularly in settings where they are expected to be touched often for extended periods of time (Jones, 2024).

Currently in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand there are no standardised guidelines, policies, or regulation for teaching social workers or teachers about a dog-first approach or to support practitioners interested in bringing dogs into their communities. As such, any person can bring any dog into these communities with very little preparation or experience. Thus, we argue that policy and standardised guidelines for dogs in classrooms and other therapeutic environments, which extends beyond school communities and into other diverse groups including therapy and support, should be defined and constructed in a way that centres the dog more wholly and better considers their species-specific perspective. These guidelines should be based on existing empirical knowledge of dogs' mental lives and the extensive work supporting the five domains model of animal welfare (Mellor & Beausoleil, 2015; Mellor et al., 2020), which includes what is fundamentally important to dogs, such as freedom to choose, bodily autonomy, and feeling safe. The five domains model is about decreasing negative welfare states while simultaneously increasing positive welfare states. To be prudent in such efforts, teaching children and adults the *language of dog* is one fundamental way to ensure consent is a locus of all interactions. Structured planning, including a well-defined training plan, should be utilised to introduce dogs into these types of environments as a way to ensure both dogs and students are prepared and can help to set valid expectations.

Centring dogs in AAI

As mentioned earlier, dogs are not often the primary focus in relative literature about canine–human interactions, particularly in AAI. This is not an isolated phenomenon. The foundational nature/culture divide of Western humanism provides the foundational logic for our human-centric practices; thus, the challenge of decentring the human (and centring the dog) can be arduous. For one, theorising about centring dogs and enacting that theory in practice poses challenges by upheaving the notion that the value of dogs belongs to humans. While such work to centre dogs more wholly may be conceptualised, it is often imbued in traditional welfarist language about the need to "look after" them properly (food, water, grooming, etc.) while ignoring any consideration for the structural legitimization of their oppression (Jones & Taylor, 2023). For example, the New South Wales Government has very vague and loose guidelines on their website suggesting that dogs should always be leashed, as well as desexed and registered with their council (see *Support Dog Guidelines*, https://education.nsw.gov.au/), but fails to mention anything about their space and emotional needs, or importance of respecting their bodily autonomy. Thus, the aim to centre dogs in this domain is fraught with pervasive humanism and traditional welfarist notions of how to use dogs more (but better).

The roots of humanist approaches to dogs as tools are fuelled by the dated ideas about who dogs are in relation to humans—that is, dominance theory and hierarchical structures of human exceptionalism (Charles, 2016; Jones, 2022)— but also by language steeped with power imbalances. The way in which dogs are socially constructed influences how they are treated by humans and by society (Jones, 2024; Lawrence, 1994), and these normative cultural practices are intimately entangled with language and discourse (Stibbe, 2001). Language can reflect and create the structure of how they are regarded, used, and treated. In other words, an ideology of *who is dog* and their duty to humans.

Ideology is a mode of thought and practice "developed by dominant groups

in order to reproduce and legitimate their domination" (van Dijk, 1997, p. 25). Thus, rather than explicitly encouraging oppression and exploitation, ideology often manifests itself more effectively by being *implicit*. This is achieved by basing discourse on assumptions that are treated as if they were common sense, but which are "common sense assumptions in the service of sustaining unequal relations of power" (Fairclough, 2013, p. 84). These ideologies are not just prevalent with dogs in AAI, but with dogs in various communities and relational contexts with humans and can inform how children and adults relate to dogs inside and outside of these environments.

Although social work and related fields of AAI have been slow to embrace the intrinsic value and interests of other animals (Fraser et al., 2021), there are existing frameworks that, with some adjustment, can help guide us. For example, Humane Education and green social work recognises that power relations flow through all domains of social work practice (Alston, 2013; Dominelli, 2012, 2013). Understanding the influences of such power imbalances can help us craft more dog-centred approaches to dogs in the domains of social work, therapeutic, and classroom communities and is the foundation of the Dogs Connect programme, which will be discussed in the next section. Thus, part of creating a new standardised (and hopefully regulated) policy for dogs in the classroom and therapeutic environments that centres their best interest is twofold: 1. Focusing dogs' agency and emotional wellbeing as individuals who have inherent value separate from their value to and with humans; and 2. The use of dog-centred language/ideology that fosters empathy and understanding for their perspective. Basing a policy in empirical evidence that considers the canine perspective (that is, including cognitive and behavioural research about dogs), we can better understand how to best design guidelines for various AAI programmes. We suggest a preferable model for these guidelines is exemplified by the Mentorship Programme designed by the Dogs Connect organisation based in Australia and could be used to help shape future regulatory guidelines and policies for AAI.

Dogs Connect

Originating from an educational context, the Dogs Connect programme emerged as a response to identified gaps and challenges faced by Grant Shannon, programme founder and co-author of this article, during his tenure as a teacher. The initiative aimed to address the unique needs of students grappling with gaps in personal and social capabilities, leading to disruptive behaviours within traditional classroom settings. Social workers in schools where Dogs Connect operates may encounter children and dogs within their communities who are particularly bonded or who gain emotional support from their presence. This relationship can be used to help children build stronger emotional and communicative skills and to feel supported and safe in potentially challenging situations. Dogs Connect emphasises the integration of wellbeing dogs, not just a visiting "therapy" dog, but a dog who becomes a community member and who enacts learning and teaching practices aimed at improving mental health and wellbeing of their community members. Because wellbeing dogs are part of the community, rather than simply a guest in the way some therapy dogs are employed, this means they have the potential to forge genuine relationships with community members as well as their caregivers. The programme evolved from reflective deliberations on strategies to support students in developing empathy and the ability to co-regulate through connections with non-human animals, particularly dogs, and highlights how the integration could benefit the dog's wellbeing by allowing them to forge meaningful, long-term relationships.

The programme focuses on preparing communities to perceive their dogs as

individuals and vulnerable, sentient beings. A fundamental element is the emphasis on dogs having choices, the ability to exercise agency, and feel comfortable in highly stimulating environments. For example, to facilitate shaping these types of interactions, Dogs Connect uses a deliberate terminology within their guidelines and by encouraging the same terminology to be used by practitioners and community members. The terminology is aimed at moving away from human-centric approaches, where words like "obedient", and "commands" are commonly used. Instead, the emphasis is on positive language, communication, and the role of humans as guardians or caregivers. Dogs-first humane education programmes aim to cultivate a sense of responsibility and empathy towards the needs and wellbeing of dogs, teaching students or clients about how to interact with dogs in the community and beyond. This is especially true if we are teaching children the "language of dog" and how to navigate consensual interactions across species boundaries in all dog–human interactions. It is about empowering individuals to understand and cultivate authentic relationships with their canine companions.

The organisation's mission extends to establishing robust processes and structures, prioritising safety, sustainability, and respect for the distinct needs of dogs (which is outlined in the following section). Over 400 Australian schools of every possible type are finding this to be a pathway to learning how to place emphasis on animal wellbeing as well as building authentic, mutual connection between humans and dogs (www.dogsconnect.net.au), and this can extend to all AAI environments.

Praxis of Dogs Connect

The philosophy propagated by Dogs Connect ensures that dogs are not exposed to risks stemming from a lack of understanding or preparedness. Recognising the importance of disseminating fundamental knowledge of dogs within communities, the programme's initiatives seek to educate through essential learnings that include topics of agency and consent for dogs. Generally, consent refers to giving permission, approval, or agreement (Jones, 2024), allowing individuals to have control over what happens to them (agency). It is typically associated with interactions between humans (Fennell, 2022; Jones, 2022, 2024); however, other animals "do, in fact, offer consent [assent], or denial/withdrawal of consent [dissent], through their emotions, preferences, behaviours, and physical/physiological states" (Fennell, 2022, p. 1). Knowledge of canine communication and learning processes are paramount for this to be successful.

However, because many humans struggle with understanding the body language of dogs (Demirbas et al., 2016), this inevitably impacts how each interaction with them unfolds (Jones, 2022, 2024), potentially eroding trust and diminishing the integrity of these relationships over time. As such, interactions may lead dogs to experience negative psychological impacts, such as increased anxiety (McMillan, 2020; Mellor et al., 2020), potentially leading to dangerous behaviour in response to feeling unsafe. Through the Dogs Connect mentorship programme, individuals are not only taught to facilitate authentic two-way connections that are sustainable but also to derive genuine enjoyment and cognitive and emotional stimulation for both dogs and humans (Shannon, 2023). Upon the establishment of an authentic connection within a community setting, educators or social workers can discover creative possibilities for integrating this connection into teaching, learning, and therapeutic practices. This is particularly pertinent in the realm of social and emotional capabilities, aspects that may pose challenges when attempting to embed them into the standard curriculum of a conventional learning environment.

To do so, Dogs Connect has structured the following programme to aid communities

in establishing and maintaining a dogs-first connection in the follow ways:

1. Legal considerations

Dogs Connect provides all legal considerations including best practice and risk assessment documents and support with how to align with existing policies, missions and vision statements for individual communities. As stated earlier, there is a complete lack of regulation about the use of wellbeing dogs involved in AAI communities, creating potentially unsafe environments that may end poorly for both humans and dogs. It is worth noting that according to the Centre for Disease Control, 4.5 million Americans receive dog bites each year (CDC, 2024), particularly young children aged 5 to 9 years old. Without regulation or focus on consensual interactions, dogs can feel unsafe and ultimately this may lead to defensive behaviours like biting (Jones, 2024). Dogs who are not well prepared, or who may not be suitable candidates, are often placed into situations which place unrealistic expectations on them. So while avoidance of these situations is emphasised, dogs are living and reactive beings and legal considerations must be established.

2. Ethical and welfare focused guidelines

One unique focus of the Dogs Connect programme is the stance that wellbeing dogs should not be viewed for their utility value to humans. There is a risk that dogs may be viewed solely as therapeutic tools to provide emotional or therapeutic support rather than as individuals with their own needs and desires. This could lead to the inattention or disregard of the dog's positive welfare states, such as ignoring signs of stress or putting the dogs into unrealistic or unfair situations that undermines their agency. This also includes other considerations about their environment, enrichment needs, choice to behave normally, appropriate rest, as well as preparedness and physical maintenance, such as grooming and travel. A recent study highlighted the wide discrepancies in guidelines and standards held by organisations relating to therapy/wellbeing dogs involved in AAI in the United States (McDowell et al., 2023). These ethical standards are of particular importance given societal expectations and community attitudes towards non-human animals (Cobb et al., 2020). The welfare of therapy dogs has been identified as a key factor for the future sustainability of these practices due to the connection between public expectations and social license to operate (McDowell et al., 2023).

Dogs Connect has woven these ethical values into their guidelines in a way that supports proper dog selection/assessment and training plans, the language they use to foster empathy and respect, the emphasis on choice, agency and consent, and the ongoing evaluation of the dog's wellbeing by qualified dog behaviour experts. Dogs Connect provides communities with templates, policy manuals, and ethical checklists to best support practitioners and their wellbeing dogs.

3. Evaluating and sourcing suitable canine candidates

Part of the process of centring dogs in school or social work settings is to find and assess suitable dog candidates. Due to the absence of regulation in Australia and New Zealand, there is an overall lack of uniform standards or codes of practice (Jones et al., 2018), including what type or level of training the dogs receive or their behavioural suitability. Evaluations include gauging both their personality and enjoyment levels within highly stimulating environments that lead to positive interactions with people in the community as well as accounting for their wellbeing and happiness. Not all dogs are suitable for this type of environment and not all dogs are equipped with the proper skills to be a part of a school or other therapeutic community.

Whilst generally organisations that employ therapy dogs use assessments based on the dog's behavioural responses in a range of different environments, Clark et al. (2019) argued that this offers no guarantee that the dog will not become stressed. Rayment et al. (2015) instead argued that a test used to measure a dog's suitability for AAI should be based on how appropriate and capable the dog is, based on the tasks of their specific role. McDowell et al. (2023) suggested that canine personality is a more stable indicator to show different behavioural responses to a stimulus. Overall, the variability or consistency of personalities among dogs that excel in AAI work has not been extensively studied and may be an area that is ripe for further investigation. This does show that having someone evaluating wellbeing dogs who is well versed in dog behaviour (for example, a certified dog behaviour consultant or board certified veterinary behaviourist) is important to ensuring dogs are thriving in their community.

It is also worth noting that the relationship of the dog and their caregivers is also identified as an essential factor that can influence the dog's effectiveness in AAI roles (Mongillo et al., 2015). The caregiver's behaviour, tone of voice, and body language can all impact the dog's behavioural response. Thus, the Dogs Connect programme seeks to build a strong connection between the caregiver and dog as a way to improve the overall experience for everyone involved, from modern, humane training programmes to their ongoing educational support (see numbers 4 through 6).

4. Training and skill-building for dogs

Concern for dog welfare in AAI has traditionally focused on aversive and coercive dog handling techniques, such as the use of choke chains, shock collars, loud reprimand, physical corrections, paired with dogs being unable to avoid social intrusions or have a "safe zone" into which to retreat (example, Fine, 2019; Hatch, 2007). Whilst these are important activities and tools to advocate against, and indeed part of the community preparedness (see point 5 below), Dogs Connect takes an even richer approach. Teaching dogs requires a deep and nuanced understanding of learning science and humane practice, but it also requires knowledge of dog body language, identifying signs of assent and dissent (and how to communicate consent effectively), as well as effective ways of teaching dogs that they have the choice to walk away from any interaction, and that their choice will be respected. This should be provided by qualified behaviour experts through one-on-one instructional classes, videos and instructional materials to aid teachers and social workers to use the most empirically founded and humane approaches to training.

Additionally, the focus should be on skills that allow dogs to succeed in a shared human–dog environment without conflict. Basic "life-skills" such as maintaining four paws on the floor, nose-to-hand targeting used for positioning their body without physical manipulation, leash walking, resting on a mat, leaving or dropping items, and appropriate communication to opt in or out of an interaction should be emphasised. These can provide the dog with clarity about what is expected of them, but also reduce conflict between people and dogs. All skills can be taught using positive reinforcement including treat and toy rewards. Having all community members work together to maintain these behaviours is a great way to help students or clients build a bond with their wellbeing dog companion and to strengthen the communication within their relationship. It also helps them to understand these positive training applications with dogs outside of the community environment.

5. Community preparedness

Dogs Connect enables a harmonious introduction of dogs into the community that include presentations, staff meetings and discussion forums to support the ongoing

development and success of wellbeing dogs. Individual dogs are introduced with their own profiles, that highlight their importance as an individual (as opposed to "the dog".) Presentations offered also focus on how to improve positive welfare outcomes for that individual, how to understand and ask for consent (and subsequently understand when consent is withdrawn), learning about body language and strategies for instructing clients or students to behave in a way that will ensure the dog feels safe.

Another part of preparing the dog's community is to arrange their environment, such as providing "safe/quiet" zones where the dog has space to relax without interruption, treat stations around the room/space to facilitate positive reinforcement of desirable behaviours, gates as needed for management of both the dog and of people (particularly so dogs are not tethered or leashed for hours on end), appropriate equipment, sensory enrichment items, toys, food, and outdoor areas. Dogs Connect also manages the daily scheduling, creating a balanced timetable and structure to the way the dog will spend their time, ensuring the dog is not overextended in their "workload."

Setting the stage for realistic expectations of the dog's behaviour, of the human's behaviour, and how to handle moments of consternation when behaviour may not meet expectations is fundamental to building trust and is the underpinning of any healthy relationship (Lemay & Venaglia, 2016).

6. Humane Education and human–animal bond

Education of community leaders and members is in part aimed at fostering a Humane Education learning environment. Humane Education has an emphasis on the impact of human actions on the natural world and other animals and seeks to raise awareness about nonhuman animal welfare and all animal rights, whilst encouraging individuals to make informed and responsible decisions. This includes, largely in the case of wellbeing dogs, the HAB.

A 2020 study by Yeung et al. found there is a general lack of understanding over how to include education about the HAB in social work practice. HAB continues to influence and contribute to the lives of families and individuals, and social workers have a duty to develop general awareness and knowledge of the benefits to human health of interacting with other animals (with their consent). Part of teaching communities about how to best interact with dogs is about improving perceptions and expectations placed on dogs within society, having a more global impact on their wellbeing outside of the classroom or therapeutic communities.

Animals often fall victim to violence with no representation of their interests. Thus, the aim of Humane Education, as well as green social work, as mentioned earlier, is to take a holistic approach that includes the wellness of the non-human animals with whom we share our homes and communities. This puts social workers and teachers who invite dogs into their communities in a unique position to advocate for improved wellbeing and consideration of everyone, including dogs. Dogs Connect helps to empower and co-create curriculum that expands on these philosophies in a practical way, including treating dogs as community members who, as such, have the right to be treated respectfully.

7. Networking and continual support

Dogs Connect ensures ongoing support by staying well connected to their communities, overseeing the welfare standards of dogs in order to continuously evaluate their emotional and physical well-being, and to ensure their continued success within their role. This support extends beyond the classroom or therapy environment and includes ongoing training support for the dog to safeguard both the humane teaching methods and the maintenance of skills

relevant to their role as therapy dog. Part of this also includes scheduling what the dogs do during the day, including outdoor and leisure time, and a balance of engagement/interactions with rest or "down" time. This is adapted for each individual dog and is based on their overall time spent in the community but is also partially facilitated through appropriate initial and ongoing assessment of dogs' suitability to ensure they are comfortable in their community environment. It also means designing and re-visiting their individualised ongoing humane training plan to ensure skills needed to navigate this unique environment are successful. Programme participants also benefit from an online community that include other wellbeing dog practitioners who share their experiences and successes in a way that can support and help people to navigate questions as they may arise, which can be a flexible approach to real-world ethical challenges (O'Mathúna & Iphofen, 2022).

8. Language

Language not only expresses identities but also constructs them, for ourselves, for other animals, for other people. Words are inscribed with ideological meanings (Chassy, 2015). At all stages of engagement, from lessons to written communication, Dogs Connect emphasises positive language and the deliberate avoidance of human-dominant terminology to wellbeing communities to operate in a manner that maintains the health and happiness of dogs during teaching, learning, or therapy sessions. This is crucial in these types of settings, as it provides an opportunity for modelling positive language more generally, and explicitly models a high level of respect and appreciation for non-human animals. One such example is the suggested terminology change from using the word "no" toward dogs who show undesired behaviour, to using the words "excuse me".

In the context of social and emotional capabilities, areas often deemed challenging to integrate into the traditional classroom, positive language and a non-dominant approach provide a conducive environment (Kosonen & Benson, 2021). This environment fosters opportunities for educators to introduce concepts related to understanding structured approaches to emotional escalation and de-escalation by comprehending the escalation cycle, supporting co-regulation between humans and dogs. The understanding of co-regulation further extends to the concept of self-regulation for both species. For example, data collected by Dogs Connect in 2023 showed that community member participants' "yes" response to "I have strategies that I can use to regulate my emotions, and I can explain them" increased from 54.8% in pre-test phase to 84.6% post-test. And that their "yes" response to "I have strategies that I can use to manage my reactivity and I can explain these" increased from 51.7% in pre-test and 89.3% post-test (Shannon, 2023).

As this understanding deepens through multiple modes and expressions, the connection with dogs presents valuable opportunities for exploring emotional literacy and consensual interactions, including concepts such as personal space and inappropriate touch.

The future of regulatory guidelines

To move into an ethical multi-species classroom or social workspace, we need to centre dogs and account for their unique and important experiences and abilities. Our unique proficiencies—Jones, a human-animal studies scholar and dog behaviour consultant, and Shannon, an educator and the founder of Dogs Connect—aptly positions us to validate the need for industry regulations. Though Dogs Connect provides a individualised support programme, its structure offers insights that support the importance of a dogs-first standardised set of guidelines and the need for policy and regulation. Therefore, we suggest a standard policy and procedure for the use of

wellbeing dogs used in AAI, which should minimally include the following overarching sections:

1. *A dog-centred model:* Integration of empirical research that highlights the mental lives of dogs and should emphasise the importance of their need for choice and agency.
2. *A dog-centred language*: Policy and procedures should strive to cultivate reverence, respect, and responsibility, all of which are important for developing cross-species competence. Part of this is avoiding the use of oppressive language, while another part is about centring the narrative of dogs.
3. *A clearly defined ethical standard for teaching methods*: Teaching dogs skills using the most humane methods rooted in a strong understanding of canine behaviour, learning science, and ethical practice. This should include training skills prior to joining the programme as well as ongoing attention to maintaining behaviours. This should be facilitated through a certified dog trainer, certified dog behaviour consultant or board certified veterinary behaviourist.
4. *A clearly defined outline of communication*: Teaching all people who are involved with dogs about body language and communication signals (displacement behaviours, stress signals and/or calming signals) that allow dogs to communicate their needs clearly and for humans to understand them.
5. *Structured planning*: A standardised structured plan can help to prepare dogs, community members, educators, social workers or other practitioners. This should involve:
   a. Teaching human learners in advance about consent/withdrawal of consent during interactions, appropriate ways to interact with their dog, being respectful of the dog's needs, and learning about the lives of the individual dog who will be joining their community.
   b. Ensuring dogs are able to communicate their needs adequately and clearly, conditioning them to the school environment ahead of time and making sure the environment is comfortable for them.
   c. Preparing the environment to welcome a dog in advance also needs some planning. For example, this might be creating safe zones that the dog can use to ask for space, having enrichment centres, or having treat stations set up to use for positive reinforcement of desirable behaviours.
   d. Teaching safety skills that help dogs interact successfully with their environment and feel safe. This should minimally include keeping four paws on the floor, a stationing behaviour (e.g., providing them a safe zone), a recall, and leash skills.
   e. Ongoing assessment by a qualified professional such a certified dog behaviour consultant or board-certified veterinary behaviourist to ensure the dog's physical and emotional wellbeing is maintained.
   f. Providing networking opportunities for collaborations and continuing education for educators or practitioners.

Detailing a dogs-first approach, which integrates these five important elements, is needed if we are to seriously consider the welfare of both humans and animals in this advancing field. Though a detailed outline of proposed standardised institutionalised and regulatory guidelines is beyond the scope of this article, future research should look at these five elements and dogs-first models (like Dogs Connect) to examine the most effective welfare-focused advancement for all AAI to ensure the wellbeing of dogs is prioritised and to create regulation for their inclusion in these types of communities.

Conclusion

The benefits of the dog–human connection extends beyond the confines

of the classroom, offering a multitude of opportunities for genuine support. The impact on the overall wellbeing and mutual aid is evident in the Dogs Connect model, both incidentally and intentionally, through structured approaches that guide these interactions. The Dogs Connect model can inform a standardised guideline for such programmes that better centres the dogs and their wellbeing in classroom communities and improves positive welfare states. The integration of the human–canine connection into educational or social work settings not only enriches the learning experience but also contributes significantly to the holistic wellbeing of all involved, highlighting the importance of a policy that reflects both canine and human values.

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE
THEORETICAL RESEARCH

Social work, women, animal protection and intersectional feminism: Making the connections

Nik Taylor[1] and Heather Fraser[2]

ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: This article is an injunction for social workers, especially social workers who identify as intersectional feminists, to include animals in their analyses of power and to consider speciesism as a form of oppression. We note that women are numerically dominant in animal protection and social work has a history as a 'women's profession' and being influenced by feminism.

APPROACH: Our central argument is that oppression and privilege that occur across the lines of species cannot legitimately be excised from intersectional feminist discussions of power, control and domination; that doing so is to ignore the most intense and uninspected form of privilege—the privilege humans have over other animals. We follow this idea in this article as we consider why it might be that (some) feminists overlook, if not deliberately ignore, the idea of animal liberation being so much in step with other feminist analyses of power.

IMPLICATIONS: Through an extended version of intersectional feminism inclusive of species, we discuss the need to pay attention to the lives of other animals. We conclude with some notes about 'radical [emotional] intimacy' between humans and animals, and their relevance to social work.

Keywords: Animals, intersectional feminism, privilege, social work

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In this article we advocate for social workers to include animals in their analyses of power and consider speciesism as a form of oppression. We note how women and feminism have shaped both social work and animal protection. We argue that species oppression and privilege should not be excluded from intersectional feminist discussions of power, control and domination; that to do so ignores the most intense and uninspected form of privilege—the privilege humans have over other animals. This idea guides our thinking as we consider why (some, if not many) feminists ignore the idea of animal liberation. We start with a brief note about our own positions as authors and follow with a discussion of some of the reasons that otherwise intersectional feminists might have for ignoring other species. We then consider how to make animals visible beyond commodities and victims, while challenging antiquated notions of animals as unfeeling, instinctual machines. Expanding

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intersectional feminism to include species, we pay attention to the lives of other animals, particularly the emotional intimacy humans and animals can share, arguing that these relations—at the very least—should be considered part of the profession's definition of the social.

About us

(Nik) I am a sociologist interested in human relationships with other animals. My research to date has focussed on the power asymmetries between species and how, and why, we might challenge them. I'm a working-class, vegan, white woman living and working in Aotearoa New Zealand.

(Heather) I am a critical social worker from Australia, who has had a long career researching violence. I am also a vegan white (settler) woman from a working-class background. My interest is in animal social work that takes seriously animal rights, rather than only focussing on the benefits animals can bring to humans.

Social work, women, and animal protection

Contemporary social work is showing increasing interest in animals, particularly in the areas of the human–animal bond and animal-assisted therapies. As a result, social work has begun to recognise that animal companions matter. This has been driven by four factors: 1) the positive effects companion animals have on humans; 2) the links between human and animal-directed violence, particularly within the home; 3) the therapeutic value of animals to humans through various animal-assisted interventions; and 4) the need to include domestic animals in disaster planning to ensure humans with animals are able to evacuate from areas engulfed by fire or flood (Evans & Grey, 2012; Fraser, 2024; Hanrahan & Chalmers, 2020; Walker et al., 2015). In recognition of these activities, both the Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand Social Work *Codes of Ethics* now include statements on the welfare of animals involved in social work practice (AASW, 2020; ANZASW, 2019). While such developments are welcome, most remain focussed on companion animals alone and on the utility of these animals to humans. To date, mainstream social work remains stubbornly resistant to considering the oppression of farmed and free-roaming animals; refusing to take seriously the ethical issues posed through the torturous treatment of animals bred for: 1) the meat and dairy industries; 2) research and testing; 3) human entertainment; and 4) recreational hunting. Animals need to be included in social work's definition of the social, especially if we are to remain relevant in a world that increasingly recognises the intertwining of human, animal and planetary wellbeing.

Women often have positive attitudes towards animals

Gender matters in social work and animal protection. Women are, and have been, the majority of social workers in Australia (Hosken et al., 2021; Seymour, 2012), India (Anand, 2009), the UK (Harlow, 2004), and in Aotearoa New Zealand, as of 2024, 85% of social workers identified as female (SWRB, 2024), a similar figure to that in England of 82% (Workforce Intelligence, 2023). This is not to exclude men, transgender and non-binary people from social work; nor to suggest that gender-diverse social workers numbers are not growing (Klemmer et al., 2024); or that they cannot have positive attitudes towards animals. It is to say simply that most social workers are women, as are most animal protection activists (Aavik, 2023; Gaarder, 2011).

It is well-documented women categorically have more positive attitudes towards animals and their wellbeing than men, usually scoring more highly on measures of pro-animal attitudes (for an overview see Herzog, 2007). Also compared to men, women are more likely to be supportive of vegetarianism and veganism (Bryant, 2019). In a recent large-scale British study

called *Some animals are more equal than others,* Bradley et al. (2020) found that women and vegetarians (mostly women) were so because of their objections to animals being used in food production, pest control and medical research. As a group, women do not just have more positive attitudes towards animals (than men) but have always played an important role in animal protection, caring about, and caring for, animals. Women are more likely to be frontline workers in shelters and sanctuaries and members of animal rights communities (Gaarder, 2011), and historically, women were among the first to argue for animal rights (Elston, 1987; Kean, 1995; Lansbury, 1985). Vegan sociologist Corey Wrenn (2019a described how hundreds of women in the 19th century founded the animal rights movement in Britain, making connections between the oppression of animals and their own oppression. These women knew that the opposition of speciesism (i.e., the idea that humans are more important than other species) was core to social justice for humans and created animal shelters and charities to support their work (Wrenn, 2019a). Similarly, the history of the animal rights movements in the US is populated mostly by women (Abbey, 2020, p. 405), and in Australia, women have historically "sid[ed] with animals" and still dominate the ranks of animal advocacy today (Probyn-Rapsey et al., 2019, p. 199). In her article, *Where the Boys Aren't: The Predominance of Women in Animal Rights Activism,* Gaarder, wrote, ". . . women constitute the single most important driving force behind the animal rights phenomenon ... [that] Regardless of age, political views, or educational level, women are more likely than men to be animal advocates ... [and] ... support animal rights" (2011, p. 55).

Animals need to be protected (from humans)

The protection of animals is so desperately needed because billions of animals are subjected to widespread abuse, much of it systemic and socially sanctioned by human society (Wadiwel, 2015). Underlying these socially sanctioned forms of animal abuse are normative assumptions of human supremacy. Table 1 identifies just some of the many possible examples across the human-imposed and overlapping categories of animals: companion animals, farmed animals and free-roaming animals.

Table 1 illustrates that human society grants few, if any, rights en masse to animals regarding: species or individual distinction and natural behaviours; connections with others (beyond humans); rights of residence (land or sea); fertility control; relationships with offspring; rescue from disaster; life itself; or a dignified death. Some of the rights denied to animals above rest upon the same logic as when denying them to women (e.g., no claim to bodily rights) and all of them involve assumptions of the supremacy of one group (humans) over another (animals); the same kind of assumptions that intersectional feminists roundly and robustly critique when it comes to humans (Kemmerer, 2011). Yet few intersectional feminists are interested in the oppression against animals.

Intersectional feminism and species

Many social workers (still) identify with feminism (Anand, 2009; Baines, 2020; Hosken et al., 2021; Seymour, 2012). While there is not one feminist social work (Hosken et al., 2021), commonly used practice principles include: seeing women in context; linking the personal with the political and vice versa; appreciating women's potential power and need to make their own decisions; flattening power hierarchies in and among women, and valuing women's strengths; recognising women's diversity, and looking for collective responses to individually experienced social problems (Dominelli, 2002). Fourth wave feminist social work (roughly post-2010) is now more likely to be intersectional, more inclusive of gender diversity and not shy to use the concept of patriarchy to push for macro, not just micro, change. Klemmer et al. (2024, p. 158) provided a good example, writing that, "Intersectional feminism explicitly

Table 1. Examples of Normative Assumptions about Non-human Animals and their Maltreatment

Companion (pet)	Farmed (livestock)	Free-roaming (wild)	Overarching assumptions and abuses
That any species humans designate as pet-worthy can be captured and kept as pets.	That any species humans designate as produce can be captured and kept in farms.	That any species humans designate as wild can be captured and kept in zoos.	*That animals can be legitimately homogenised through the category of animal; that they have no right to species distinction.*
That pets should be relied on to soothe, entertain or otherwise comfort humans, and be ever-available for petting.	That farmed animals have no intrinsic right to their skin, muscle or other body parts.	That free-roaming animals have no intrinsic right to their skin, muscle or other body parts; That they make good targets for human hunters.	*That animals have no claim to body rights.*
That animals can and should be taken from their families to live out their lives as human pets.	That animals can be farmed for because humans think they taste or feel good (as in soft leather).	That free-roaming animals have no connections with others (no group or family clusters) and that it is not important to learn about them.	*That animals have no right to their connections in and among their own species.*
That pets can be expected to lead their lives contained in aviaries, fish tanks, dog runs and/or sterilised human homes, and behave as humans wish.	That farmed animals can lead their lives in highly constrained and human regulated conditions such as factory farms, where even touching their offspring may be forbidden.	That wild animals do not live anywhere in particular; that the migration patterns of free-roaming animals should not stand in the way of economic progress for humans; nor the species of free-roaming animals that use the land as their habitat.	*That animals have few or no rights to enact species-specific behaviour or the right to occupy land or sea.*
That companion animals are legitimately bred through forced impregnation, and that the products of such reproduction are owned by humans who may sell them as commodities on the open market.	That farmed animals are legitimately bred through forced impregnation, and that the products of such reproduction are owned by humans who may sell them as commodities on the open market.	That wild animals have no right to reproduce unless in zoos or other artificially constructed compounds, where they may be sold by humans as commodities on the open market.	*That animals have no right to fertility control or to their offspring*
That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable, if not lawful, to abandon these companion animals, even if they have no means of escape.	That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable if not lawful to abandon these farmed animals, even if they have no means of escape.	That when human-induced disasters occur, such as drought, fires, floods, it is reasonable if not lawful to try to save only the land inhabited by humans.	*That in times of (human-induced) disasters, animal protection is not a big priority and their deaths do not really count.*
That when animal shelters get overcrowded from humans surrendering or abandoning their pets (as seen during Covid), it is understandable if not lawful to euthanise perfectly healthy animals.	That when the price of livestock falls below the cost to keep them, or they have aged out of their utility for humans, it is understandable if not lawful to have them slaughtered.	That it is understandable if not lawful to cull wild animals (such as kangaroos, horses, deer) if they bother humans or get in the way of economic progress, even if these animals are endangered.	*That if humans do not want them, animals have no right to live.*
That pets such as kittens and puppies may be thrown out in garbage bins or drowned if they are surplus to human requirements.	That it is lawful to slaughter farmed animals in such brutal and terrifying conditions; that it is designated as "humane" to gas pigs alive; and that it is convenient to shred day old male chicks because roosters are mostly redundant in the animal agriculture business.	That it is understandable if not lawful to cull wild animals if they bother humans or get in the way of economic progress, or new housing developments even if these animals are endangered.	*That animals have no right to a dignified death*

rejects the legitimacy of patriarchal rule and initiates social movements to alter laws and customs to ensure that equality and social justice for marginalized groups are achieved".

Non-human animals need humans to create major social change—including new laws and customs—and feminist social workers would do well to lean on intersectional feminist arguments that include animals in their analyses of power and to consider species as an axis of oppression. Kimberlé Crenshaw, a Black American legal scholar and rights activist originally coined the term intersectionality in 1989, to refer to the ways Black women's experiences were intersected by their experiences of racism and sexism; that their experiences were more complicated than say, adding up the harms from black men's experiences of racism, white women's experiences of sexism or white working-class people's experiences of classism (Collins & Bilge, 2020; Weldon, 2008). Since then, feminist intersectionality has expanded to help us understand the nuances of oppressed (devalued) and privileged (overvalued) social identities, such as those associated with race, gender, class, ability, sexuality, age and geographical location. As Angela Davis argued (2017), black and Indigenous women have redefined the very project of feminism—from a narrow, middle-class, white women's feminism to one that has intersectionalism as its basis. However, she also argued that it is a shame that we seem to have accepted the original idea of intersectionality and left it largely uninspected. Instead, she calls for continued attempts to find other ways to talk about the messiness of intersectionality.

Intersectional feminists recognise that the intersection of social identities (such as race, gender, class) are interconnected and interdependent, often reinforcing each other, for example, the privileges afforded white, younger, able-bodied men on the basis of their overvalued identities as white, young, able-bodied and male (Collins & Bilge, 2020). Most intersectional feminists challenge all forms of domination—except domination by species. And yet, some of the key ideas that underpin both intersectionalism and ecofeminism offer powerful tools for the analysis of speciesism. Early ecofeminists, for example, wrote about the ways animal oppression and the dehumanising logics of racism and settler colonialism were connected (Taylor, 2024). Similarly, Deckha (2012) pointed out that incorporating a postcolonial approach to animal oppression allows for a response to the oft-invoked charge of elitism, ethnocentrism, and imperialism aimed at anti-oppression, vegan advocates. A charge that Robinson (2020) argued is, in fact, a barrier to Indigenous veganism. Deckha (2012) pointed out that it is commonly argued that veganism is only accessible to white, western, urban elites. Yet this, she argued, "obscures the reality that in many parts of the globe, it is more expensive to lead a nonvegetarian lifestyle than a vegetarian lifestyle, with animal flesh marked as a luxury item or indulgence" (p. 535). Elsewhere we have provided further elaboration for expanding intersectional feminism to include species (see Fraser et al., 2021). Here we want to explore the idea that oppressions should never be placed in a hierarchy.

Intersectionality rightfully urges us not place human oppressions in a hierarchy, so there is no crude tallying up of how many oppressed identities one has (also called the race to the bottom or oppression olympics). However, we think this reluctance to place oppression and privilege in a hierarchy needs to be rethought where humans and animals are concerned. We say this *because there is no more radical a dichotomy than the one between humans and animals.* As soon as the term *animal* is invoked, the door is flung open to socially sanctioned abuses of unimaginable kinds (such as the live-shredding of day-old chicks, also see Table 1 above). As devastating as human oppression is for all oppressed, no other human dichotomy allows for the dominant group to lawfully, and with very little/no outcry, cull or farm the oppressed for food, forcibly impregnate them to be sold

as commodities on the open market, for the consumption of their offspring, skin and flesh.

Why might so many intersectional feminists ignore species?

Despite the vast array of well documented, socially sanctioned and culturally normative forms of animal abuses and suffering and their connection to human forms of oppression, including gender and sexual oppression, intersectional feminists still largely ignore domination and oppression by species. Why might this be so? We outline three possibilities below.

The first fear is that many of the gains of feminism in the last few decades might be lost if we focus too closely on other animals. In part this is due to the essentialist legacy of (some) cultural ecofeminisms that argued the connection between women and nature was grounded in biology. It is key, here, then to remember that social ecofeminism did not make such claims, instead arguing that the relations of oppression across nature and gender were socially constructed (Gaard, 2011). However, this fear is the outcome of working within traditional paradigms that not only leave established ideas of human supremacy intact, but often actively support them (e.g., through scholarship choices, funding body rationales, etc.) and thus devalue forms of *animal studies* (used as an umbrella term here) as feminine, feminised and based on emotion (Fraiman, 2012; Probyn-Rapesy et al., 2019). It is here, perhaps, that we feel most let down by feminists who refuse to address speciesism. After all, feminists of any ilk should be aware of the need to be attendant to their/our epistemological position and the attendant need to be aware that if we do want to criticise the centrality of rationalist machinations, then we have to do so wherever they appear—even if that appearance is in feminist and/or animal studies work.

The second reason many feminists sidestep or ignore *the animal question* is that they want to continue to consume meat, dairy and other animal products without having to question the ethics of doing so. Carnism is a compelling discourse in most societies, including Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, where we are writing from. Feminists, like so many people, often profess a love of animals while promoting meat-eating. Think Donna Harraway eating a ham sandwich (Charles, 2022), or Plumwood's "context-sensitive semi-vegetarian position" (2004, p. 53). To paraphrase Nickie Charles (2022), many feminists do not see the moral inconsistency of purporting to love animals while also eating them.

The third major reason is that this fear of being associated with animals (and their low status) spills over into the lives of professionals including academics. As we have argued elsewhere (Fraser & Taylor, 2016; Taylor & Fraser, 2021) the doing of feminist animal studies in the academy is subject to multiple forms of denigration: that it is 'soft' and 'fluffy' work focussing on something (other animals) that is not important, and that it is predominantly done by women. As Probyn-Rapsey et al. (2019) argued, animal studies only really gained academic respectability when certain male academics were nominated "founding fathers", despite earlier feminist work already occurring in this area. Similarly, Fraiman (2012, p. 100) pointed out that "proximity to this feminized realm" manifests in an anxiety which she labels "pussy panic" that leads to a devaluing of feminist contributions.

Paying attention to the lives of other animals through intersectional feminism

Social workers have found it very useful to draw from the notion of intersectionality and are well positioned to include animals given their/our focus is on the social and social problems. An intersectional feminist

reading of human–animal relations is paramount in social work if we are to create real social change—the kind non-human animals desperately need. Intersectional feminist understandings rest upon the idea of praxis—of a need to use theoretical understandings to drive real-world change.

Intersectional feminism, inclusive of species, offers a wholistic possibility of social change. Termed by some as *total liberation*, it is argued that, to free any marginalised group, all others must also be freed because the structures of oppression share commonalities across all groups. In this way, feminist analyses of human–animal relations, the place where imbalances play out at their most extreme, are analyses of power: to be human is to hold power over other animals. And an analysis of this power, its links to gendered (and other forms of) inequality, and its multidimensionality helps extend feminist thinking and animal studies thinking in turn.

An intersectional feminist lens that centralises the power asymmetries they experience vis-a-vis humans, allows us to see the routine harms perpetuated on animals. As Woodward (2008, p. 6 cited in Banks, 2016, p. 63) argued, "We need to move beyond 'the reductive issue of animals' lack of language to imagine the potential of new discourses between humans and animals". Birke pointed out that these relationships are those of kin, where animals "share in the co-creation of meaning, and intersubjectivity" (Birke, 2007, p. 314). Several feminists are currently exploring these questions of relationality with other animals. And, as Donovan argued over two decades ago, this necessitates close attention to other animals, not merely theorising about them in an abstract sense, but working alongside them to develop what we might refer to today as solidarity in our attempts at multispecies justice: "implicit in feminist animal care theory … is a dialogical mode of ethical reasoning, … wherein humans pay attention to—listen to—animal communications and construct a human ethic in conversation with the animals rather than imposing on them a rationalistic, calculative grid of humans' own monological construction" (2006, p. 307).

Recognising interspecies emotional intimacy

In and beyond social work, we need a comprehensive body of work that attends to our intimate emotional relations with other animals and demonstrates what relationships based on care and mutual respect might look like. One key part of this requires acknowledging that the *different other* is simply that—different, not inferior. And it flows from this that we will also need different tools in our toolkit if we are to *see* and concomitantly make visible such relationships. In her work called *Intimate strife: The unbearable intimacy of human animal relations*, Beth Carruthers (2009, p. 44) wrote,

> We like to view ourselves as moral beings; we want to do the right thing, whatever that may be, and in the case of human–non-human relations, when we go in search of it, somehow that right thing seems always to reflect back as an image of self-interest (solely, or primarily human) as paramount and separate from the interests of other beings.

When it comes to recognising what animals offer in and beyond humans, we can be more than well intentioned. To do so, however, we need truly innovative ways of looking at the world and other animals in it if we are to achieve this elevation of other species—methods that allow us to decentre the human and our preoccupations with language and symbolism. Returning to feminist theories of the body and marrying them with ethnographic methods that have room for sensory input is one way forward (Borthwick, 2006; Hamilton & Taylor, 2017).

When we choose to pay attention to interspecies relationships, we can often see a kind of radical intimacy. An intimacy, that if

heeded, has the potential to raise questions about the capacities of other animals on their own terms instead of on ours. It is precisely this relationality that is made visible when we attend to close relationships across species. Importantly, this need not be limited to animal companions. We can look at radical intimacies in animal sanctuaries too, for instance, and see the ways in which other species interact with each other and with us. Those working from this premise argue that this kind of ethics of care approach is needed at an epistemological as well as practical level if we are to dismantle current oppressive structures. Writing about Singer and Regan's attempts to disassociate themselves from sentimentalist, and presumed feminine, approaches to animal wellbeing preface in *Animal liberation* (1975) and *The case for animal rights (*1983) respectively, Donovan (1990, p. 351) argued,

> Regan's and Singer's rejection of emotion and their concern about being branded sentimentalist are not accidental; rather, they expose the inherent bias in contemporary animal rights theory towards rationalism, which, paradoxically, in the form of Cartesian objectivism established a major theoretical justification for animal abuse.

This rationalist basis for animal rights, which tends to be the mainstream one, therefore closes down one of the most important questions about our relationships with other animals: what might these relationships look like if we had not boxed ourselves in with specific beliefs about other animals, their place and their faculties? In following this question, we can then promote the idea of "abolitionist feminism" (Davis, 2017). Abolitionist feminism which focusses on imagining transformation stands in opposition to punitive feminism—the kind of feminism that, for example, argues for punitive solutions to the violence against women. And while this means that we are constantly caught up in trying to "find ways to give expression to the social reality that always exceeds our ability to find concepts" for it (Davis, 2017), it urges us to imagine something different and thereby becomes about transformation as opposed to integration.

Social work, by its definition, focuses on the social dimensions of life of which animals are part. Human–animal relations should be considered part of the profession's definition of the social. When we pay attention to the lives of other animals, particularly the emotional intimacy humans and animals can share; and when we use an expanded version of intersectional feminism (inclusive of species) we can begin to understand important social relations as yet under recognised and undervalued.

Concluding comments

This article calls for social workers, especially those purporting to use intersectionality, to include species as an axis of privilege (for humans) and oppression (for animals).

To quote Ahmed (2017, p. 2), "To live a feminist life is to make everything into something that is questionable". Some intersectional feminists are questioning everything and are working towards a better world for all animals, humans included (see also for example, Gigliotti, 2017, 2022; Salmen & Dhont, 2023). However, most are not, at least when it comes to animals. Many feminists (social work or otherwise) do not consider other species, even while happily embracing the idea of intersectionality and extending it; one that dismantles hierarchies and their attendant oppressions, from its original focus on Black women to other marginalised (human) groups. We find this curious, short-sighted, and often disheartening given women's proximity to animal protection and animal rights movements both in the past and today (Elston, 1987; Gaarder, 2011). We also find it disturbing given animals need protection from humans more than ever. This article, then, is a call to heed Angela Davis's (2017) comment that we need to find other ways to talk about the

messiness of intersectionality, in particular by incorporating other animals, and how that can be done from within social work, and how it might affect social work practice and theory. We have argued that paying attention to the radical intimacies of human–animal relations using the tools provided by an intersectional feminism that draws on Black and Indigenous feminisms will allow us to re-think and to imagine a different future; one that dismantles hierarchies and their attendant oppressions.

We have argued that women's involvement in both social work and animal protection makes for some relevant and, as yet, underexplored possibilities. Ahmed (2017, p. 15) wrote, "In a world in which *human* is still defined as *man*, we have to fight for women and as women". To this we would like to add that in a world in which human is still defined as almighty, we have to fight for animals and prevent their abysmal treatment as animals.

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Transition into social work practice: Experiences of newly qualified Māori social workers

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Research is scarce about the experiences of newly qualified social work students, as they transition into the workplace after a 4-year Bachelor of Social Work degree in Aotearoa New Zealand. There has been little interest in the spaces where a student and beginning practitioner navigate the complexities of social work theory and actual social work practice. Additionally, research into the experiences of newly qualified Māori social workers (NQMSWs) is also rare. This research is aimed at capturing the transitional experiences of NQMSWs from the Bachelor of Social Work at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology (Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata) as they embark on social work practice.

METHODS: Māori graduates of the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata were invited to engage in one-to-one interviews, in a qualitative research study underpinned by the values of Kaupapa Māori Research that highlighted a cultural nuance of the graduates' first experiences of being independent practitioners.

CONCLUSION: Findings include the alignment of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga which underpin the sense of safety that the NQMSWs expressed as supportive for this transition. Additionally, these Māori concepts were embedded during the time of their studies in the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata, and provided a transitional space that encouraged and propelled them to seek those types of relational skills of practice when engaging with clients in their everyday mahi (work).

Keywords: Newly qualified Māori social workers, transition, whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga, tuākana/teina

In Aotearoa New Zealand, the beginning of social care has its whakapapa ties linking to tangata whenua and iwi structures, within pre-colonial times. During this time Māori had a robust and flourishing system of social guardianship and support that encompassed whānau, hapū and iwi (Kingi, 2005). Moreover, throughout the colonial process of British settlers migrating to Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori cultural practices including those related to social care were often oppressed, and Eurocentric ideologies were privileged (Pihama, 2019). Te Tiriti o Waitangi was eventually signed between 1840–1844 constituting a broad statement of principles linked to an exchange of promises between British officials and Māori chiefs who made a political covenant to create a nation-state, and to build a government (Taiuru, 2020). Additionally, this founding ideology creates a base for civil government to protect and acknowledge Māori rights and

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interests. It is often argued that Te Tiriti o Waitangi has influenced and shaped the way in which social work is provided throughout Aotearoa New Zealand (Beddoe et al., 2018).

A key issue that impacted the way in which social work developed in Aotearoa New Zealand relates to the late emergence of formal social work, linked to the first formal qualification in this profession being established post-World War II in 1949, with the founding of the School of Social Science at the University College of Victoria in Wellington (Nash, 1998). Social work in Aotearoa grew out of a welfare state that was ambivalent about the role a social worker should play, alongside being developed within two different cultural contexts. This included the tensions that exists between them (Staniforth, 2010). When it comes to social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand, this sits within the development of social work which is similar to other countries (Beddoe et al., 2018).

In 1998, the programme for the Waiariki Bachelor of Applied Social Science (Social Work) was developed for ākonga in the Bay of Plenty. In 2016, the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata was implemented by Waiariki Institute of Technology in response to the requirements of the Social Workers Registration Board and to what was essential for accreditation and service delivery of education in terms of changing from a 3- to a 4-year degree (Department of Education, Social Science and Languages, 2016). Additionally, Waiariki merged with the Bay of Plenty Polytechnic in 2016, and was renamed Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. In 2023, there remains a strong focus on culturally appropriate, fundamental theory and praxis learning opportunities for social work ākonga that incorporates valuing Indigenous learning in the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata. These understandings are founded on biculturalism that supports the development of both Māori and other cultural worldviews facilitating and enriching the development of a beginning social work practitioners' identity. The Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata, unlike most programmes in Aotearoa, has 60 credits (four courses over 2 years) of te reo Māori and 45 credits (three courses: Year 1, 2 and 3) of specific learning linked to social work practice with Māori clients. This links to the strong bicultural focus of the degree that in part was a response to the original designers who wanted to acknowledge the high percentage of Māori living and working in the Bay of Plenty.

There have been no specific studies done for Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology for NQMSW experiences of practice, beyond holding information on graduate destinations on a yearly basis. According to Hunt et al. (2016), readiness of newly qualified social workers in Aotearoa is a topic that highlights the challenges of new practitioners as they develop their practice and construct their identity across a space of diverse agency service provisions and fields of practice when working in the community. Māori social workers integrate their culture into their practice, according to Hollis-English (2015). Therefore, identity, values and beliefs are incorporated across the transitional spaces of personal and professional, highlighting the conduit of work, home, and the community. Social work practice does not happen in a vacuum and Laming (2009) described the complexity of managing risk and working autonomously through critical reflection and evaluation, which has an added layer of public and media scrutiny, as part of the everyday experience of the new graduate.

Newly qualified social workers are viewed as being novices in, and yet untested within, the profession of social work, and the first professional employment experience is far from the guided and protected space of the educational institution, with field educators and lecturers close at hand (Franklin, 2011; Hay et al., 2012; Hunt et al., 2016). This underpins the rationale for this research to understand what this experience is like for

a NQMSW in contemporary social work that is being delivered in the current social and political climate and what learning and practices from the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata has helped this transition into practice.

Methodology

This research employed a qualitative research design and was underpinned by Kaupapa Māori theory capturing an authentic experience of being Māori and being a NQMSW in what is still considered as a western oriented system of social services. The employment of Kaupapa Māori theory in this research embraced the participants in a space aligning with te ao Māori and a Māori way of knowing placing the participants as creators of their own knowledge and privileging their voice above other aspects of research which is often oppressed in a western paradigm. This methodology highlights the legitimisation of Māori worldviews and firmly asserts the eclectic nature of Kaupapa Māori Theory as welcoming and affirming to other methodologies (Lipsham, 2020; Pihama, 2001; Smith, 1997). A lens and the tools of pūrākau were employed through story-telling and Māori narratives supporting the theoretical gaze of Kaupapa Māori theory where a critical theory edge of rangahau was important. Pūrākau is an ancient form of transmitting knowledge to create shared knowledge and therefore identity (Cherrington, 2003; Lee, 2009; Stansfield, 2020). The telling of stories about experiences of NQMSWs provided a space for critical reflection which is a core element of social work practice (Lipsham, 2020). Moreover, Kaupapa Māori theory allowed for an exploration of te ao Māori to interpret and analyse findings of this research through a lens of culture that privileges a Māori way of knowing the world as authentic and robust.

Method

Santana Williams, a recent graduate of the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata in 2023 and co-researcher, contacted six Māori graduates of the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata. Santana conducted the kanohi ki te kanohi (face-to-face) interviews with the oversight of the main researcher. A general set of semi-structured questions were used to elicit kōrero (discussion) from the participants during the interviews in a relaxed and informal manner and were recorded for the purposes of transcribing them as data for the research. The recordings were transcribed verbatim. The vignettes provided in this article are samples directly from the transcripts. Both researchers collaborated in the analysis of the transcripts and field notes taken by Santana during the interviews.

Analysis

The experiential orientation of thematic analysis points to data that aligns with the thoughts, feeling and actions of the participants (Braun & Clarke, 2012). This is important to the understanding of how Kaupapa Māori Theory and pūrākau becomes a vital tool in this research. The participants were NQMSWs and therefore to capture the nuances of how they developed their identity through this transition into social work practice and being Māori were highlighted in the stories of their experiences and their point of view of the first year of their practice. Common words, thoughts, Māori concepts, and understandings created patterns across the data. Additionally, unique words, thoughts, Māori concepts, and understandings produced more individual experiences and therefore different data. Both approaches when coded and themed, supported identification of what is in the data in terms of meaning and creates a space for interpretation. Kaupapa Māori theory was employed to underpin te ao Māori concepts in the kōrero of the participants privileging their knowledge or pūrākau as legitimate.

Pūrākau or storytelling has long been a tool used by Māori to pass down

traditional narratives of philosophical and cultural understanding. According to Lee (2009), this te ao Māori context aligns with how Māori identify themselves both historically and in contemporary times, and privileges Māori knowledge as legitimate. The kōrero of the participants is privileged as their authentic experience without the need to validate this through isolable units of measurement. Instead, their reoccurring kupu (words) and concepts from the data held cultural meaning when pūrākau was the lens that the discussion was shone through and then interpreted by the researchers.

The research identified that all the participants worked in social work practice in the contemporary social and political space that Aotearoa New Zealand is currently experiencing by supporting whānau and extended whānau with their individual or collective social circumstances. This comprised of social work within the whānau across the lifespan; disability; family harm; mental health and wellbeing, alcohol and addiction services and social housing, although this is not an exhaustive list. Five out of six NQMSWs were fully registered with the Social Workers Registration Board supported by their agencies through payments for an Annual Practising Certificate at the time of this research. Most agencies had other registered professional services including mental health teams, registered nurses, occupational therapists and cultural advisors.

This research wanted to assess the social work models used in the agencies and encountered by the NQMSWs as part of their everyday mahi (work). Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata has a strong focus on practising with Māori and includes 2 years of learning te reo Māori and 3 years of understanding Te Tiriti o Waitangi and practising social work with Māori. Additionally, the use of Māori models of health and wellbeing were prominent alongside humanistic approaches to working with whānau.

Te Whare Tapa Whā has always been something that we utilise, within our whānau that we work with … as soon as you pull out a blank piece of paper, draw 4 squares, identify the different areas of Te Whare Tapa Whā they know what it is … I give a whānau a blank piece of paper and say … do you want to work on your Te Whare Tapa Whā today? They can do a whole page of Te Whare Tapa Whā which is really good … I think Kaupapa Māori is prominent everywhere in our organisation. I often reflect on Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and often when, within Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs you can't really excel to the next level until, the first level has been accomplished … a lot of people are still sitting in basic needs … they don't have food and shelter. (Participant 2)

Well, let's face it the main one would be Te Whare Tapa Whā, that's well ingrained … we look at the whānau, the hinengaro, tinana and wairua, so anything that's impacting those or how we can strengthen that … we use strength-based models. (Participant 4)

I will always use Te Whare Tapa Whā, always! Because it is holistic, simple and I don't have to remember all parts of the model, people are familiar with it, so this is what I use in most of my practice. It's a great model to use as it can be utilised with varying cultures, which is important within the community because practitioners are engaging with many different cultures. We do the violence wheel; we do the self-care wheel and that just helps them to understand where they are. So yeah, you don't often see models until it comes to a space where you are explaining things, if that makes sense. You barely see it, it's a natural thing. (Participant 5)

It is a Kaupapa Māori organisation, without having to think about how you are practicing Kaupapa Māori it is just naturally happening…we draw on

> pūrākau with our programmes with our workshops, so everything that we deliver from here has a purpose and a reason and the intension is drawn from mātauranga from way back … being Māori and working with Māori, working in a Māori realm of thinking. (Participant 6).

The Bachelor of Social Work is a 4-year degree full time with 480 credits, 16 semesters and 28 courses. During this journey of study, the NQMSWs had explored their core values, and what experiences had created them. Now that they were practising in the community, what comes into sharp focus linked to the realisation that they have a strong sense of who they are and how this influences their practice.

> The learning that came from the Bachelor of Social Work was about me. It really picks apart your life, it hones in on your core values, as well as the models and theories and what social work is all about. It is about you and the way you practice. So, the learnings I have taken from the degree are implemented into my mahi because of who I am. So, because of my values and beliefs that's how I implement them into my mahi as a Māori practitioner in social work, that doesn't mean I have to only be working with Māori to do that. You know who you are, so you are pou [pillar] to yourself. (Participant 1)

> We often have similar circumstances and background and history [as the clients] and it's good because, you know, I try and not come in with the flash words and the academics of it … but when they know that I've got just as much family as them, and that we have all our family dynamics, they understand that we are similar. You know how I was speaking about the values, I think one beautiful thing, about what I have taken from my Bachelors is … understand yourself … like your knowledge, your also developing yourself, your exploring yourself, for example, like as a Māori learning about the treaty hit really hard at first and it was really mamae (painful/sore), because it was like facing the reality of what you were like and how you did not help that, you know, and yourself worth as well. (Participant 2)

> That very last end of it … advanced social work practice … we did the integrated model, it drew it in for me, so it wasn't until that point, I thought gosh! Who am I? I still to this day give credit to the Bachelor of Social Work for allowing me, to find me. I thought I knew who I was, until I didn't, yeah, I would recommend the Bachelor of Social Work the way I got it … it hit all the spots it was supposed to. In terms of challenging my whakaaro, challenging those biases that you have, I was challenged to the max, to the max. (Participant 3)

Identifying the experiences of transition into employment as NQMSWs highlights the kind of support from agencies that were appreciated and valued in terms of employment. These supportive factors included an agency that was assessed by the participants as aligning with their own values of te ao Māori, tikanga and being whānau centred in their practices. The participants also discussed the feeling of being included and welcomed as Māori practitioners and being provided autonomy as a tool for developing their practice.

> I'm valued in my mahi, my opinions matter, who I am as a Māori social worker matters … [I am] able to work the role how I wanted to work it. (Participant 1)

> I think for me it's quite funny because I think a lot of my placement … I may have come off as a bit clever, that kind of built the assumption that I am a competent practitioner, but to myself I wouldn't consider myself fully competent in being able to, you know do everything within social work. (Participant 2)

> But yeah, no I've been extremely privileged, and everyone's been super supportive, I think my personality helped, I think, I can be a little bit cheeky you know … all in all it's been an absolute privilege working here, it's also allowed me to connect with my mum's side of the whakapapa, so my marae is … literally around the corner, you know, so working here with my ancestors and I feel grounded on this whenua because it grounds me. (Participant 5)

> My experience of this transition into this place has been amazing, well supported and I think because of the kind of service I have come into, it aligns with my values and with where I am heading, that hasn't been hard, everything has been comfortable, I'm well supported, and if anything goes wrong it's an easy kōrero to have with my managers. (Participant 6)

Gaps in learning from the degree and transition into work included a lack of understanding of how to become provisionally registered as a social worker with the Social Workers Registration Board. Identified gaps in the degree when compared with transitioning into practice included spaces in the skills associated with self-care and time management. Other discussion around gaps in learning included a lack of knowledge of the service provisions of various social work agencies in the community.

> We didn't know where we stood in terms of what it looked like to be registered, how do we register? Do we need to be registered to get mahi, when are we able to be registered. How much it cost that was vital. Also, there was a big gap in making sure we were ready. (Participant 1)

> Yeah, which is very difficult … case noting would be one thing that I think, that it would of, because our job is a lot focused on admin stuff. Yeah, you know we do goal setting and strengths and needs assessments and sometimes screening and things, but it would be when you've got to put that down on paper and the timelines … are you doing justice to the people you are talking about are you representing them well enough for them to have their mana upheld. (Participant 2)

> I think there is a gap between what an NGO [non-government organisation] looks like and a government agency, so there's a huge gap there. (Participant 3)

> So, I think another thing where they could go more in depth with, is what safety looks like, because sometimes when you think you are safe out there … you are not. (Participant 5)

> Oranga Tamariki, they have all these sections … my first encounter with Oranga Tamariki on my own she expected me to know this and even though I let her know that I am a new social worker, she expected me to have an idea about what the section blah blah blah was … maybe some learning if that was possible around that … other than that there hasn't really been much of "oh I wish I learned that". (Participant 6)

The final question in this research asked what it was like being a NQMSW and transitioning into practice. The participants described the connection to self, their identity, to their whānau and to the communities they serve as being highly motivating and affirming. Participants talked about the pride they had for themselves as being NQMSWs and how the relationships they held with their lecturers, fellow students, their agencies and the people the NQMSWs engaged with in their daily practice, made a difference in how they saw themselves. In addition to this, the current political environment is influential within contemporary social work practice.

I feel I came out of the degree well equipped and when I did my 4th year placement. There was a cohort from [a university] and then there was us from Toi Ohomai, the difference between the cohorts was huge. It was huge in terms of what their learning had been like compared to what our learning had been like. I'm going to be biased here by saying, we were on top. So, one thing we were told, when studying, was how valued we are as social workers and especially as Māori social workers. We were told this, numerous amounts of times by [two of our lecturers]. What they also said to us was, this is what you are worth … know your worth … when you go to an interview you negotiate, because this is what you are worth, so they gave me the power, within myself to think, yeah nah you're bloody right, I am worth it. I've just finished [4] years of training, come out of there with all these skills and as a better person. (Participant 1)

You know before the elections, it was so cool to be brown, it felt like we were a part of a bigger picture that was moving in our history and then decolonisation was happening and it's kind of come to a standstill or a reverse. I'm so proud to have done our te reo papers within our degree and learning all of those things and being a part of a Kaupapa Māori organisation, having te reo spoken freely, having Waiata … karakia every morning, wananga every so often it feels so good to be Māori and I was a whakama [shy] Māori … I am still whakama; to be able to speak te reo and things, you know you get people who might think that we don't matatau te reo or that matatau mātauranga but just to have an inkling of some recognition as a Māori, it's nice. (Participant 2)

[The lecturers] made it real for me, they made me think I was actually going to be a practitioner leaving that space. (Participant 3)

It's connected me to my whenua, its connected me to me as a Māori, to me as a wahine and to me as a māmā, so it's opened different windows and doors that I want to go through. (Participant 4)

I think from where I sit, I come from, even though I don't come from the richest family, I still sit in privilege, but you know, this job has allowed me to provide for my own whānau. I can give back now and that helped with my overall health. (Participant 5)

I think that just it's a very proud space to be in as a Māori regardless of if you're a social worker or a navigator or whatever you are. It's a mean position to be in as a Māori working with Māori and providing outcomes that benefit not just that one whānau Māori but Māori in general. Yeah I think that's all my feedback I just love it. I can't wait to be able to provide a bigger change for our whānau rather than just a service, something bigger. (Participant 6)

Findings

Three major concepts were illuminated through the transcripts where reading and re-reading the participant kōrero. Discussions between both researchers supported the allocation of broad themes for this research. The themes included whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga and tuakana/teina as the cultural nuance to the data analysis and are te ao Māori concepts.

Whakawhanaungatanga

Whakawhanaungatanga is closely related to the connections that Māori have through ancestral, spiritual, and traditional philosophy (Ritchie, 1992). The theme of relationships featured in the transcripts and was reflected in the NQMSWs acknowledging growth in their social work practice and reflective skills, supporting their ability to complete their jobs with competence by utilising Māori models of

health and, in particular, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994). The first relationship the NQMSWs discussed was the relationship with themselves. This connected to the space of knowing who they were, bringing into sharp focus where they are from, or a place where they felt grounded and safe. The identification of values and beliefs of being Māori and feeling valued as new Māori graduates was a strong indication of the relationship the NQMSWs held about themselves. Ruwhiu (2001) described the mana-building strategies that support wellbeing for clients—this is also reciprocated for those who are implementing these techniques, enhancing the mana of both parties. It can be argued that enhancing the wellbeing of others has a beneficial effect for the NQMSWs' identity and therefore, their sense of selves as Māori, and as social workers.

The second relationship relating to whakawhanaungatanga links to the relationship between the clients and the NQMSWs. Whakawhanaungatanga in this space is described by Mead (2003) as an indication of obligation to those people around us to be treated and protected as if they were whānau. Another concept of this second type of relationship of whakawhanaungatanga is associated with the understanding that the inherent status of all parties is brought into a space or environment during human interaction (Bishop et al., 2003). Moreover, this status has a transactional quality where all parties within the relationship benefit from each other. This was identified in the research where the NQMSWs supported clients to get to court and doctors' appointments; learning to negotiate and advocate across different sectors of the social and health sectors. This supported the clients in their basic needs, and the experiences supported practice development for the NQMSWs. It can be argued that this reciprocity transitioned across a space where the NQMSWs supported and protected the clients as an expression of them being whānau.

Manaakitanga

Manaakitanga was another te ao Māori concept identified in the research and has been described as a transitional space where reciprocity and relationships are brought from tapu (sacredness) to noa (neutrality) (Wright & Heaton, 2021). Collaboration and the obligation to support those in need is discussed by Ritchie (1992) as the ritual processes linked to generosity and respect and underpins the understanding of manaakitanga. Manaakitanga in the research related to supporting clients through communication, connection and supporting their voice to be heard in the decision-making process of social work practice. We are informed by literature that the voice of Māori is often silenced and ignored through the processes of racism, marginalisation, and a blamed, othered analogy regarding their social circumstances (Elers & Elers, 2017; Harris et al., 2006; Houkamau et al., 2016). This identifies the importance of having a social worker who is passionate and protective of those people that they serve. In addition, manaakitanga can be linked to the care of, and sharing of, resources, linked to the availability of kai (food) parcels or other forms of funding and immediate relief related to health and welfare for whānau. Another type of manaakitanga can be linked to the provision of housing for those who are finding it difficult to acquire suitable and safe accommodation. NQMSWs are in the forefront of emergency housing in Aotearoa and so are working with whānau and landlords to secure the most basic requirement of shelter—having a home to live in.

Tuakana/teina

The final te ao Māori concept linked to social work practice identified in the transcripts was that of tuakana/teina. Tuakana/teina relates to a traditional understanding founded on whakapapa (lineage). We are informed through cultural practices that tuakana/teina engaged through a process of genealogical order of birth is defined as an older brother of the male, an older sister of a female, or a cousin from an older branch of whānau who

are of the same sex (Reilly, 2010). Therefore, a teina is a younger brother of a male, a sister of a female or a younger cousin of the same sex from a younger branch of the whānau. The reciprocity of this relationship is perpetuated through generations of a whānau ancestry (Mead, 2003). This context of an older, more knowledgeable person supporting another, less knowledgeable, person can be identified in the transcripts through the relationships between the Bachelor of Social Work teaching team at Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology and the NQMSWs. The concept is mimicked through each person passing down practice or other types of knowledge to guide and support safe social work practice and therefore, providing the possibility of a positive outcome for whānau using the services of an agency. Additionally, it is argued that this concept of passing down knowledge aligns with the NQMSWs, and their learning from their degree that was provided to their clients or in the service of their clients.

Gaps in learning

Aspects identified by the NQMSWs that they felt were missing from their learning in the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata, included information regarding the process of registration after completing their 4-year degree. Additionally, practice skills including client note taking were also highlighted as a gap in learning. Social worker safety whilst working was discussed in the transcript providing a valid point regarding the need to have concentrated learning on how to maintain personal safety when interacting with clients.

Conclusion

Kaupapa Māori Theory guided the research methodology through privileging the knowledge provided by the NQMSWs as legitimate and authentic. Additionally, this allowed the foregrounding of Māori ways of knowing that supported the NQMSWs to feel valued and heard as they developed their sense of identity and how they wanted to practise. Transition into agency social work practice after completing the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata was supported by a sense of safety that was associated with the te ao Māori concepts of whakawhanaungatanga and manaakitanga acting as a transitional space or bridge to what still is defined as a Western oriented profession of social work in Aotearoa. Everyday interactions by the NQMSWs with agencies and clients were guided by the navigation of Māori values and beliefs including the use of te reo Māori, and Māori models of health including Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1994). By practising in a manner that protected their clients as if they were actual whānau linked to whakawhanaungatanga. Manaakitanga as a theme linked to enhancing client mana through access to resources that supported their physical and spiritual wellbeing. The concept of tuakana/teina was highlighted through the process of passing down knowledge through two spaces. This was highlighted as being between lecturers teaching on the Bachelor of Social Work and the NQMSWs, followed by knowledge from NQMSWs being passed to the clients accessing their services. A sense of identity relating to knowing yourself functioned as a strong protective factor for the ongoing development of practice far from the security of a tertiary classroom for the NQMSWs. Māori models of health and wellbeing played a dual role of familiarity from the learning in the Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata and the implementation of this model in Māori agencies. NQMSWs actively navigated towards those agencies that supported and honoured these cultural nuances and practices as their first place of employment further supporting and propelling their knowledge learned in the degree.

It can be argued that the current Bachelor of Social Work Te Tohu Paetahi Tū Tāngata offers a supportive journey for Māori social work students with theory, skills, and practical education alongside the building of capacity of cultural competence and safety. This research project offers a reflective space for the te ao Māori concepts of

whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga, and tuakana/teina in how they relate to social work education in the future. Learning te reo Māori was highlighted by the participants as being beneficial. Additionally, familiarity of Māori models of health and wellbeing proved essential in everyday practice. Knowing oneself as being Māori, and valued for this, supported confidence, and a sense of duty towards clients that can be embraced, nurtured, and propagated within te ao Māori aspects of whakawhanaungatanga, manaakitanga and tuakana/teina. This illuminates an important finding of this research that suggests social work education needs to provide comprehensive learning in these areas for future social work practitioners in Aotearoa New Zealand.

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Family environment of children with specific learning disabilities: Implications of parent-mediated home interventions in family-centred social work practice

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: Family relationships can be very challenging, and raising a child with specific learning disabilities (SLDs) can create even more stress for a family. While a young person's problems may seem most noticeable at school, they quickly become a family affair. What happens in the family affects each child, and what happens with each child affects the family.

METHODS: The study objective was to determine the factors impacting relationship, personal growth and system maintenance and change in families having children with SLDs using the in-depth interview (lasting for an hour or two) method. The sample consisted of 10 mothers of children with SLDs belonging to special education centres and special schools in South Bengaluru, Karnataka, India, selected through a purposive sampling procedure. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was used to analyse and code texts relating to the study objective. After completing the coding for each data set, the codes were reviewed again to identify the sub-themes.

FINDINGS: The analysis revealed that the family's living experience, emotional climate, way of overcoming conflicts, showing care and appreciation, self-enhancement, spending quality time, parenting style, family structure, strengths and challenges and good practices are some of the factors impacting relationship, personal growth and system maintenance and change in families having children with SLDs.

CONCLUSION: The study emphasises the need for parent-mediated home interventions focusing on improving the family environment of families having children with SLDs.

KEYWORDS: Family environment, factors, children, specific learning disabilities, implications, family-centred social work practice

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Specific learning disability (SLD) is a neurodevelopmental disorder that is characterised by a persistent impairment in at least one of these areas: reading, writing and/or math (Luna, 2024). A child with an SLD may also have difficulties in information processing, thus affecting his/her organising abilities, attention, coordination, memory and social-emotional development. An SLD is not a single disorder, but it is an umbrella term for dyslexia, dyscalculia, oral/written language disorder, specific reading comprehension deficit and non-verbal learning disorder (Learning Disabilities Association of America, 2024).

A systematic review of six studies from 2012 to 2020 by Scaria et al. (2023) reported an 8%

prevalence of SLD in India. Singh et al. (2017) said that the majority of the children diagnosed with an SLD are in the age range of 8–12 and dyslexia is the most common one. However, most schools fail to regard SLDs as a disability and label such children as failures (Malik, 2009). Disability labels and classifications become laden with meaning. Such labels can assume significant power in defining individuals' opportunities and limitations (Foreman, 2005, p. 57).

Family dynamics and SLDs

SLDs create problems, not only for the children but also for their families, by becoming a stressful intervening aspect in their natural process of development. From the instant parents become alert to their child's SLD, another dimension is added to the family system. While a young person's problems may seem most noticeable at school, they quickly become a family affair (Osman, 2023).

A parent's response to a child as well as the child's qualities and traits contribute to the personality of the family. It has been found that children with special needs have substantial effects on family functioning and relationships (Grossman, 2001; Sahu et al., 2018). One parent, often the mother, may recognise and face the problem more readily than the other; this leads to misunderstanding and conflicts in the family. Siblings often dislike the amount of attention given to a child with special needs and grandparents tend to blame parents for not doing their best and giving enough support to the child (Smith, 2002).

Family environment

The environment of a family encompasses the situations and social climate settings within families (Fields, 2024). It is a social condition that influences the personality of its members. The result of such an influence is complex and reciprocal (Balážová et al., 2017; Qi et al., 2022). Thus, a family environment and its dynamics greatly impact the members of the family system (Chelladurai et al., 2022; Ogirala, 2020; Wu et al., 2022).

According to Gillis (2023), a healthy family respects emotional and physical boundaries, accepts each member of the family as an individual with an opinion, sets consistent and age-appropriate rules, meets the needs of the members, makes members feel safe and secure and expects members to commit mistakes and forgive them. Families that are enduring, cohesive, affectionate and mutually appreciative, with excellent levels of communication raise children who form successful families. Their families are not trouble-free but can deal with crises constructively (Peterson & Green, 2009).

Theoretical framework

Rudolf Moos developed the social climate theory in 1979 in order to understand the natural chemistry that exists between individuals and their social environments (Jason et al., 2019). He highlighted people's perceptions of their environment and claimed that there are three broad dimensions for diverse social environments, namely relationship; personal development and system maintenance; and change. Relationship refers to the degree to which the family setting is supportive and cohesive. It includes cohesion, expressiveness and conflict. Personal development focuses on the self-determination of its members and includes independence, achievement orientation, intellectual–cultural orientation, active–recreational orientation and moral–religious emphasis. System maintenance and change addresses the balance between flexibility and certainty and includes organisation and control (Holahan, 2002; Vostanis & Nicholls, 1995).

Purpose of the present study

The study tries to understand the family environment of families having children with SLDs by determining the factors impacting relationship, personal growth and system maintenance and change. Three questions are posed: First, how is the relationship among

family members in families having children with SLDs? Second, how is personal growth emphasised in families having children with SLDs? Third, how is the system maintenance and change in families having children with SLDs? Family functioning and perspectives of families with disabilities have been of importance to researchers for some time. The Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 2009) has been extensively used by researchers to assess the social climate of families but the literature reviewed showed that little qualitative research has tried to study the factors of a healthy family environment with respect to the dimensions of relationship, personal growth and system maintenance and change as proposed in social climate theory.

Review of literature

Research studies on the themes of 'children with specific learning disabilities, 'parental perspectives and challenges towards specific learning disabilities', 'family dynamics of families with learning disabilities', family environment of families having children with SLDs', 'family environment and its factors', 'relationships in families with learning disabilities', 'personal growth and enhancement in families with learning disabilities', 'system maintenance and change in families with learning disabilities', and 'intervention strategies for families with disabilities' were searched through databases like PubMed, Science Direct, Scopus, Web of Science, Google Scholar, PsycINFO and JSTOR. Literature relating to parents living with children with SLDs was included and ones relating to single parents of children with SLDs and parents having chronic, mental or terminal illnesses were excluded. Over 150 research articles were reviewed to study the family environment of families with SLDs, the determining factors and existing intervention strategies.

Parents and teachers who are ignorant about SLDs may label the child as disinterested and lazy, even if they are brilliant and innovative but it is essential to remember that most children with an SLD are as smart as children without an SLD. It is just that they have to be taught in tailor-made ways depending on their SLD (Kemp et al., 2024). If the adults can address their needs, offer a nurturing environment, and avoid interfering with their uncertainties, anxieties, and random routines, all children will do well in their own time (Biglan et al., 2012).

Parents often display negative attitudes and responses toward their child's diagnosis of SLD, such as denial, rejection, overprotection, and loss of hope. Caregiving is also understood to put a lot of physical, social, financial, and emotional burdens on most parents (Robledo-Ramón & García-Sánchez, 2012; Sahu et al., 2018).

According to Heiman and Berger (2008), parents of a child diagnosed with SLDs perceived their family's expressive feelings as lower and the family organisation as higher and even perceived their friendships and other support as lower. Such parents show more avoidant coping, a lower sense of coherence, and less emphasis on family members' interrelations and personal growth when compared to families without children with disabilities. Hence, parents of children with disabilities seem to display a higher burden and impaired quality of life (Khan & Alam, 2016).

Methods

This study conducted in 2023 aimed to determine the factors impacting relationship, personal growth and system maintenance and change in families having children with SLDs using a qualitative approach. This approach was used as it is capable of providing rich descriptions of the matter under study and the subjective experiences of the participants (Sofaer, 1999). The in-depth interview method was used to collect the data from a sample of 10 participants, selected through the purposive sampling procedure. These participants were the mothers of children with SLDs belonging to special education centres and special schools in South Bengaluru, Karnataka, India.

According to Zachariah (2023), children with SLDs are mostly diagnosed after they are 8 years old. But for some children, the signs could be visible even before formal schooling or not until middle school (Kemp et al., 2024). It is also a common belief that children with problem behaviours will outgrow them and become individuals with normal functioning (Child Mind Institute, 2024). Hence, the participants were the mothers of children with SLDs in the age group of 7 to 11 years who were diagnosed by certified clinical psychologists, psychiatrists or pediatricians. Mothers were considered apt for the study as traditionally, they have been considered as caregivers and homemakers in the family system (Bornstein & Putnick, 2016; Kenny & Yang, 2021).

A pilot study was conducted with a parent to assess instrumentation rigour and address any limitations. The instrument was then validated and finalised following the guidelines given by four subject matter experts. Table 1 shows some of the items in the semi-structured interview guide.

Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Conduct and Ethics Committee, CHRIST (Deemed to be University), Bengaluru. After informing the identified participants about the study and obtaining informed consent in writing, they were involved in one to two hours of interactive discussion based on the interview guide. Based on the data obtained, it was understood that data saturation was achieved and further data collection would not yield new insights (Saunders et al., 2018). The data obtained from in-depth interviews were analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis framework. The analysis of the data obtained began with the verbatim transcription of the audio-recorded discussions. The audio recordings and transcriptions were then examined for consistency. Each transcription was read multiple times to familiarise oneself with the data and ultimately subjected to thematic analysis. Thematic analysis helps to identify and analyse meaningful patterns in a data set and shows the significant themes in describing the matter under study (Clarke & Braun, 2017). Texts relating to the objective of the study were analysed and coded. After completing the coding for each data set, the codes were reviewed again to reduce redundancy and identify sub-themes. After collating the sub-themes from all the data sets, they were matched to the major themes and themes.

Results

Table 2 shows the socio-demographic profile of the participants. All participants were females and belonged to the age group of 30–50. Out of 10, nine parents have a bachelor's, master's or professional degree; seven of them are employed and only two of them belong to joint families. The children of six parents had been diagnosed with SLD for more than 2 years.

The relationship between the major themes of relationship, personal growth, system maintenance and change and the themes of cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance and caring, independence, active recreational

Table 1. Items in the Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Item No.	Item
3	What is the emotional climate in your family?
4	What do you most enjoy and appreciate about each person in your family?
5	How do you spend time with each other?
9	How does your family help you with personal growth and self-enhancement?
15	How do you overcome conflicts and differences of opinion in your family?
16	How do family members deal with changes in your family?

Table 2. Socio-demographic Profile of the Participants

Participant	Age	Education (Degree)	Occupation	Family Type	Child's SLD	Child's Age	Time Since Diagnosis of Child's SLD
1	30-40	High School (or equivalent)	Self-employed	Nuclear	Written Language Disorder	11	More than 2 years
2	40-50	Master's	Self-employed	Nuclear	Dyslexia and Written Language Disorder	10	More than 2 years
3	40-50	Professional	Teacher	Nuclear	Dyslexia	11	More than 2 years
4	30-40	Bachelor's	Homemaker	Nuclear	Written Language Disorder	6	More than a year
5	40-50	Bachelor's	Homemaker	Joint	Dyslexia	11	More than a year
6	40-50	Master's	Self-employed	Nuclear	Dyslexia, Dyscalculia, Dysgraphia and Specific Reading Comprehension Deficit	10	More than 2 years
7	30-40	Professional	Private-servant	Nuclear	Dysgraphia and Oral Language Disorder	7	More than 2 years
8	30-40	Master's	Homemaker	Nuclear	Specific Reading Comprehension Deficit	11	2 years
9	30-40	Bachelor's	Private-servant	Nuclear	Dyslexia, Dyscalculia and Written Language Disorder	8	1 year
10	40-50	Master's	Private-servant	Joint	Dyslexia and Written Language Disorder	11	More than 2 years

orientation, organisation and control have been elucidated in Figure. 1. The sub-themes derived from the analysis of the interview transcriptions are seen in Table 3.

Discussion

Relationship in Families Having Children with SLDs

Cohesion

Family living experience: The participants described their experience of living with family as joyful, pressurising, hectic, stressful, great, chaotic, challenging, fulfilling and exciting but exhausting. The participant shared:

> Since the pandemic, we have been working online. It has become a little chaotic because we tend to get on each other's nerves a lot. Our personal and professional lives are just colliding. But one thing I have realised is that we need a lot of space, which is not there now. We also need to spend some quality time together. (Participant Six)

The parents reported that being in the company of family members and spending quality time is essential for good family living experiences. It is also found that families with high cohesion have the most positive patterns of communication (Mikaeili et al., 2023). In addition, Ma et al. (2023), in their study, found that family adaptability and cohesion predict the subjective wellbeing of parents having children with disabilities.

Expressiveness

Emotional climate: The emotional climate in the families was described as happy, caring, understanding and supportive, securely attached to volatile, sad and aggressive outbursts during stressful situations. One participant shared:

Figure 1: Diagrammatic Representation of the Relationship between the Major Themes and Themes

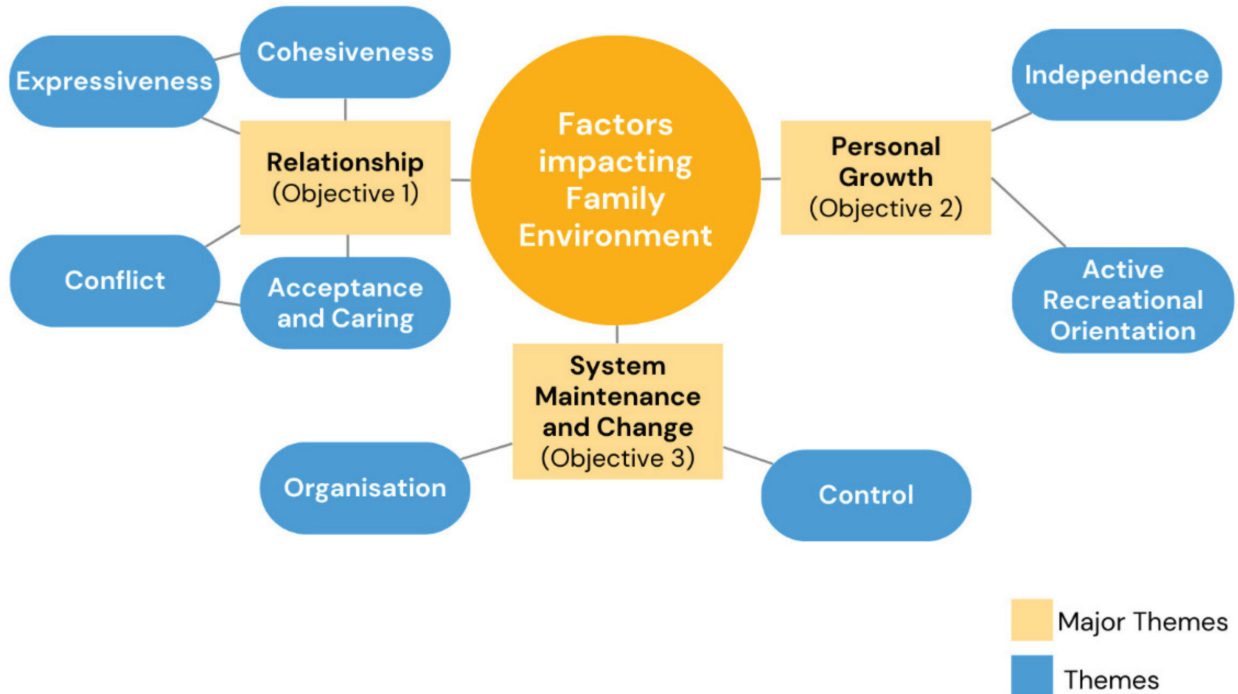

Table 3. Sub-themes Derived from the Analysis in Relation to the Major Themes and Themes

Major Themes	Themes	Sub-themes
Relationship	Cohesion	• Family living experience
	Expressiveness	• Emotional climate • Communication
	Conflict	• Ways of overcoming conflicts or differences of opinion
	Acceptance and Caring	• Aspects of enjoyment and appreciation • Ways of showing care and appreciation
Personal Growth	Independence	• Personal growth and self-enhancement
	Active Recreational Orientation	• Spending time with each other
System Maintenance and Change	Organisation	• Parenting style • Family's role in children's education and development • Family structure and roles and responsibilities • Strengths of the family • Challenges faced • Dealing with changes • Good family practices • Scope for improvement
	Control	• Limit setting

> We share most of the things with each other. But maybe as kids grow older, they may not be sharing a few things with us. But apart from that we are pretty much attached. None of our activities in the house are done in isolation. (Participant Three)

Most families have a secure emotional climate but, in a few families, there are emotional outbursts during stressful situations. These outbursts are frequent in families where the parents of children with SLDs do not allow for free expression of feelings (Heiman & Berger, 2008; Idan & Margalit, 2014).

Communication: The communication between members was open as well as erratic. Participant Six shared that their communication "is very erratic sometimes. There are times when they try and be calm and there are times when they just speak their mind. There has to be more consistency in their communication."

Most families practise open and honest communication but one parent reported that they need to work on improving their communication. Positive emotional expressiveness and low anxiety levels predict supporting parenting styles, effective coping mechanisms and increased cohesion in families with disabilities (Mikaeili et al., 2023).

Conflict

Ways of overcoming conflicts or differences of opinion: The families overcome conflicts or differences of opinion by praying, discussing the pros and cons, making decisions collectively, shouting and screaming and trying to convince the other person. A participant shared:

> We enter into a great argument. It will be a long discussion to try and understand what the pros and cons are and to bring conclusions. If that doesn't happen, we just give it some more time and discuss the same a couple of days later. (Participant Seven)

Parents reported that they have discussions to understand the problem and others' perspectives better before arriving at a collective decision. However, it is essential to consider the fact that families raising children with disabilities experience a lot of challenges that impact family relationships, work and social life. In the face of such challenges, parents and other family members may feel dissatisfied, shocked and at a loss (Kumar & Lal, 2024; Sen & Yurtsever, 2007). These feelings could turn into denial, conflict, and anxiety affecting all the family members.

Acceptance and Caring

Aspects of enjoyment and appreciation: The family members enjoy and appreciate each other's honesty, perspective sharing, independent attitude, perseverance, survival instinct and the willingness to take care of oneself and others. Participant Six said, "she appreciates the fact that her daughter is very honest and speaks her mind. And her husband thinks he is better at parenting, and helps her to have different perspectives in situations."

Parents and carers of children with disabilities require love and support as they deal with emotional and practical challenges (Baines, 2023). Caring for a child with a disability can negatively impact physical health, sleep, marital and social relationships, work, etc. However, parents and caregivers must maintain and develop social relationships and take pride in dedicating their lives to the wellbeing of the child with a disability (Davis et al., 2010). Lodewyks (2015) indicated that focusing on the positive impacts and contributions of a child with a disability might influence the meaning the caregiver attaches to stress.

Ways of showing care and appreciation: The family members show care and appreciation towards each other by cooking for the family, helping with household chores, appreciating successes, being verbal about one's emotions and hugging. The participant shared:

> Sometimes handling work, personal life, and kids becomes very difficult. So my husband takes up sixty-seventy per cent of the burden. It can be as simple as making a morning coffee, getting kids ready for school or just spending time with me to understand how my day was. My kids try to get things done on their own when either of us is unwell. (Participant Seven)

It was found that expressing kindness within families increases family life satisfaction. According to Duncan (2020), healthy families notice and share the positive aspects of each member and make a conscious effort to foster closeness and show love at home. She also found that showing care and appreciation towards the children enhances their development and reduces problem behaviours.

Personal Growth in Families Having Children with SLDs

Independence

Personal growth and self-enhancement: The family members help each other with personal growth and self-enhancement by sharing the responsibilities of the household and providing encouragement and financial support. This participant shared:

> My grandparents were very supportive whenever I needed them to be around. My kids were much younger when I was a full-time working mom. Because of their support, I was able to have a corporate job for a very long time. (Participant Three)

Independence promotes positive emotions and helps family members feel that their life has a purpose (Jones, 2024). Like children with disabilities, their parents expect more determination and motivation for personal achievements (Idan & Margalit, 2014).

Active recreational orientation

Spending time with each other: The family members spend quality time with each other by eating out, watching television, having meals together, celebrating festivals together, going for weekend outings, going for walks, watching movies, sleeping over at a friend's or relative's house and meeting friends and extended family members. Participant Seven said "on weekends we either go for a walk or a movie. Sometimes we all sleep together in the living area."

Good family-centred practices lead to greater levels of cohesion and better relationships within families with disabilities (Mitchell et al., 2016). According to McGuire and McDonnell (2008), there also exists a predictive relationship between recreation and self-determination in adolescents and young adults.

System Maintenance and Change in Families Having Children with SLDs

Organisation

Parenting style: The participants had different ways of describing their parenting styles. It included a mix of appreciation and correction, strict but flexible, overprotective cum harsh, confused with the right intentions, liberal and collaborative and directive. One participant shared:

> I have a terrible parenting style. I am a confused parent with the right intentions. I constantly question if I am right or if I am a good parent, which means, I am doing some part of the job at least. (Participant Six)

Parenting styles and practices are vital in promoting self-determination and self-esteem in children (Meral et al., 2023). Homayoon and Almasi's (2021) study also concluded that the best predictor of self-esteem in students with SLDs is parenting style. According to Raya et al. (2013), the authoritative style of parenting and definite practices such as limit setting, communication, independence and monitoring are described as good predictors of adaptive behaviours in children.

Family's role in children's education and development: Families prioritise children's education and development. Parents describe their influence as "very much involved" and supportive. The participant shared:

> As parents, we try to understand what is required for today's era. We try to bring in the required material to shape their educational aspects so that they don't feel left out and spend time understanding their pain points and help them with it. (Participant Seven)

The role that families play in a child's education and development is crucial and has a significant impression on the child's success not only in academics but also in other aspects of development (Singh, 2023).

Family structure and roles and responsibilities: Family members have roles to play and household responsibilities are shared among all. Participant Nine said "it is not a rule book kind of thing. I will take care of the household and my husband will take care of the finances. But with respect to child-rearing and other activities both of us chip in."

A structured family environment provides children with security and control in an uncertain world. This uncertainty always brings along with it positive or negative changes which affect wellbeing, especially mental health (Bhandari, 2024).

Strengths of the family: Open communication, being there for one another, especially during hard times, unity, compromising attitude, learning from mistakes and motivating each other are recognised as strengths in the families. Participant Seven said "open communication and being a nuclear family are definitely their strengths. Apart from these, the freedom to do things and the space given to each one of them, which is age-appropriate and as per the limits are also important." The strengths of a family provide the foundation for growth and positive change. Families can grow stronger by capitalising on their strengths (Olson et al., 2013).

Challenges faced: Some of the challenges faced by the families are finances, spouse staying away from home, family member's health, child's SLD and academic progress, managing work and household responsibilities and not having grandparents at home. The participant shared:

> Getting our son back on track was challenging after his diagnosis. It was a sudden shock for us because we did not know how to proceed with it. So the challenge is to find the right support for him, get him adjusted and pave a path for him to succeed. (Participant Nine)

Just as every family has strengths, they also have weaknesses. It is important for family members to be aware of them so that they can adapt appropriately (Faithful Parent, 2023).

Dealing with changes: The participants feel that their family members find it easy to deal with changes. Some of them even prepare themselves and others for the foreseeable changes. This participant shared:

> When there are changes in the family, I can see the changes in his behaviour. He becomes very cranky or doesn't want to do things that he generally does on a day-to-day basis. But my elder one tries to understand the change and how it is affecting her and then tries to accommodate it. (Participant Seven)

Families who recognise that children are going through a transition and provide the necessary support at the right time are enabling them to handle new experiences better (Bhandari, 2024). Such family environments help children develop a healthy lifestyle that lasts into adulthood and builds healthy familial relations (Buskirk, 2017).

Good family practice: The participant's families indulge themselves in different practices that ensure a good family environment. They include thinking of the future, dividing

responsibilities, ensuring laughter in the house, sharing happiness with everyone and being available for others anytime. Participant Three said, "they have their meals together. Their doors are never closed. They know that each member has their own space and that they will always be in and out of it."

Parents are responsible for arranging the family environment and setting a model for healthy behaviour (NIH News in Health, 2013). Fostering healthy habits in families can help children succeed in the long run. It is also found that making wellbeing a priority strengthens emotional connections and improves mental health (Chavez-Mitchell, 2024).

Scope for improvement: However, the participants feel that some aspects of the family environment need to change. Parental influence on children, use of social media, lack of communication, self-discipline, crisis management, adherence to routine and work–life balance are some of them. One participant shared:

> Maybe a little bit of each one's self-discipline and adherence to routine. Because we have a crazy work life and more often than not we are pulled towards working for office hours and then some of the activities which we decided that we would be doing for ourselves, do not happen. (Participant Nine)

Identifying aspects for change or improvement is important for the growth and development of families. It helps families to build, evolve and refine unhealthy practices and behaviours (NIH News in Health, 2013).

Control

Limit setting: Most of the participants said that a family timetable is strictly followed. Logical restrictions are in place for screen time, playtime and discipline. One of them also said that there are no restrictions and that it is flexible. One participant shared:

> As a family, we have limits. I think this helps in bringing discipline and understanding the importance of things. We feel that things have to be rewarded or earned rather than getting for free, irrespective of whether it is us or the kids. (Participant Seven)

Families teach a child right from wrong by setting limits. Limit setting ensures that they grow up to become well-adjusted individuals who understand interpersonal boundaries, social standards and moralities (Canopy, 2007; Young Scholars Academy, 2022). A study by Idan and Margalit (2014) found that the family climate of families having children with SLDs emphasised greater organisation and control.

Limitations

Even though the study produced meaningful results, it was limited. Since all the participants were female, the male perspective on the matter was absent. The conclusions drawn cannot represent the male's family living experiences. The sample size was also minimal, making it difficult to generalise the findings to the wider population.

Future directions for research

Further researching the matter, and considering the limitations of the study could help to enhance our understanding of the factors impacting the family environment. Future research could also make use of a mixed method to do away with the exclusive limitations of the qualitative approach. A mixed-method research design allows the researcher to have a deeper level of understanding of the matter under study by providing a holistic picture (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The family environment scale (FES) is a self-report measure developed in 1974

by Rudolf Moos and his colleagues to assess the social climates of families. FES measures and describes the interpersonal relationships that exist between family members on the direction of personal growth and the organisational structure of families (Moos et al., 1974, p. 3). The FES (Moos & Moos, 2009) could be administered to a large sample to study the level of dissimilarity and similarity between family members' perceptions of the family in three ways: as it is, as it would be in perfect situations and as it probably will be in new situations. The interview or observation method could study the unforeseen facades of a family environment to help in the explanation of the quantitative data (Wasti et al., 2022).

Parent-mediated home interventions in family-centred social work: Implications

Need for parent-mediated home interventions

Even small children shoulder the expectations of their family and society. Parenting becomes difficult and stressful when children do not live up to expectations (Latson, 2024). Excessive stress can even lead to caregiver burnout which involves emotional, mental and physical exhaustion, along with feelings of detachment, helplessness and apathy (Yuen Shan Leung & Wai Ping Li-Tsang, 2003). In addition to stress, parenting a child with an SLD can damage the self-efficacy and psychological wellbeing of the parents and also their interactions with the child (Finardi et al., 2022).

There has been considerable progress in developing various intervention strategies to support the parents of children with disabilities. These are categorised into four area: family systems; instructional; interactional; and positive behaviour support programmes (Breiner et al., 2016). Family systems programmes promote resiliency, self-efficacy, coping skills and stress management in parents. Instructional programmes support parents to improve the skills of their children with disabilities (Green et al., 2010). Interactional programmes help enhance positive interactions between children with disabilities and their parents and others. Positive behaviour support programmes aim to improve parenting practices related to behaviour management (Breiner et al., 2016).

Parent-mediated home interventions can aim to support parents and others with a wide range of activities and a few points for consideration for improving cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance and caring, independence, active recreational orientation, organisation and control in families having children with disabilities. These interventions should be designed with a focus on parenting and employ a strength-based approach to draw upon the fortes of the children with SLDs, parents, and other family members. A systematic review of 14 pre–post intervention studies and nine randomised controlled trials by Koly et al. (2021) found that parent-mediated interventions are effective and feasible for children with neurodevelopmental disorders. These studies reported improved parent–child interactions, social and communication skills in children, parental knowledge and academic performance in children. Studies in the field of autism spectrum disorder suggest that parent-mediated interventions can enhance parents' knowledge and impact the social behaviour and communication skills of children and adolescents (Manohar et al., 2020; Padmanabha et al., 2018). Such interventions significantly influence cognition, socio-emotional skills and daily living activities and enhance the abnormalities in sensory processing in children and adolescents with autism spectrum disorders (Juneja et al., 2012).

Family-centred social work practice

An overwhelming proportion of social workers work with children and families in various settings. Social workers practising family-centred social work focus on enhancing the capacity of families by providing them with

the necessary information and resources required to support children and themselves (Kemter, 2024). Though this philosophy is emphasised in diverse settings, it has to be integrated into social work practice with children with disabilities and their families (Strock-Lynskey & Keller, 2006).

Social work with children is one of the fundamental areas of intervention in social work. The social worker's role is crucial in the disability area. With a holistic approach to children with disabilities and their environment, social workers work in partnership with children with disabilities, families, caregivers, and service providers (Joseph, 2015; Rahim, 2024). They identify the needs and difficulties of the child, provide social and emotional support, empower the child and his/her family to enhance their quality of life and provide social inclusion, community living, quality education and rehabilitation (Dash, 2020). Child and family welfare social workers practise in fields like child protection services, counselling and therapy, clinical and mental health, special needs and disabilities, rehabilitation, etc. These social workers could develop and assist parents of children with SLDs and significant others with parent-mediated home interventions to enhance their family environment. A good family environment strengthens family bonds and helps individuals fulfil emotional needs, improve their mental state and boost energy to overcome challenges. It could enhance family member's emotional interaction with one another and bring about a good level of balance that supports closeness within the family and the independence of the individuals. The family members would be more willing to listen and understand each other's propositions thereby reaching new agreements which are in line with the respect and integrity of all (Cullenward et al., 2024).

Conclusion

Family relationships are complex enough, and raising a child with an SLD can create even more stress for a family. The child, even a small one, shoulders the expectations of his/her family and thus when the child is diagnosed with SLD, it takes the form of a family illness. The findings of the study concluded that the aspects of cohesion, expressiveness, conflict, acceptance and caring, independence, active recreational orientation, organisation and control impact the family environment and functioning and emphasise the need for effective parent-mediated home interventions focusing on improving relationships, personal growth and system maintenance and change in families having children with SLDs.

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Companion animals, poverty and social work

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ABSTRACT

INTRODUCTION: A consequence of poverty is social isolation which can be lessened by having a companion animal. It is noted that people experiencing poverty go without food and other material goods to provide for animals in their care.

METHODS: The findings presented in this article are from a doctoral study in which 23 women and five men were interviewed using a qualitative approach. Applied thematic analysis was utilised to identify themes from the data.

FINDINGS: Companion animals provided participants in this study with a sense of security and friendship. The latter was particularly important as it reduced social isolation for participants. When participants had companion animals, they prioritised food for their animals over food for themselves and went without other material goods to care for the needs of their companion animals.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE: It is important for social workers to recognise the significance of companion animals when working with people living in poverty. Consideration should be given in social work assessments to the role companion animals have in the lives of people living in poverty and to reducing the costs for people in relation to caring for their companion animals.

Keywords: Companion animals, poverty, social work assessments, social isolation

Poverty is a significant issue for social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand and is often the backdrop of social work practice (Morris et al., 2018). Poverty in Aotearoa New Zealand has been intractable this century; however, under the sixth Labour government there were some improvements in the numbers of children living in poverty. Despite recent progress in reducing rates of child poverty there continue to be significant numbers of children and their whānau living in material hardship, prompting advocacy groups who represent the needs of children to write an open letter, in November 2023, to the incoming government to express their concern about the urgency of the problem (Child Poverty Action Group, 2023). In 2022, the Child Poverty Monitor identified that 11% of children in Aotearoa New Zealand were experiencing material deprivation and 16.3% of children live in households with an income under 50% of median income after housing costs (Duncanson et al., 2022). Alongside child poverty there is growing concern about poverty among older people, particularly those who do not own their own homes (James et al., 2022).

The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers (ANZASW) *Code of Ethics* recognises that social workers

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"have a particular interest in the needs and empowerment of people who are marginalised, vulnerable, oppressed or living in poverty" (2019, p. 9). The code of ethics also acknowledges that animals are sentient beings and, if as social workers, we engage animals in our practice then they must be protected. The following article, using interview data from a wider study about rural poverty, explores the significance of companion animals in the lives of people experiencing poverty and the implications for social work practice.

Poverty can restrict peoples' social networks and result in social isolation (Topor et al., 2016). A mixed method study in Canada, which explored poverty and social isolation, found that their participants had minimal involvement in their community or in supporting others (Stewart et al., 2009). In Aotearoa New Zealand, the Family 100 research project, a qualitative study with 100 families/whānau living in poverty, noted social isolation among their participants who self-excluded from social, family and cultural events due to poverty (Garden et al., 2014).

Significantly, companion animals can reduce social isolation by creating a sense of friendship and companionship (Scanlon et al., 2021; Slatter et al., 2012). For people who are isolated, a companion animal can provide a significant and stable relationship which can mitigate the effects of loneliness (Ceatha, 2020; Jury et al., 2018; Matsuoka et al., 2020; Schmitz et al., 2023). It has been identified that having a companion animal can also reduce stress, depression and anxiety (Slatter et al., 2012). Companion animals can also increase opportunities to meet and engage with others (Slatter et al., 2012), helping to widen social connections.

The costs of having a companion animal can be high and can include such things as food, equipment, puppy classes and dog training, desexing, the cost of transport to vets and exercise areas, grooming, vaccinations, and veterinary services (Arluke & Rowan, 2020). To meet the costs associated with feeding and caring for their companion animal/s people living in poverty may choose to go without food and other goods and services (Violante, 2019). Having a companion animal, particularly a dog, can restrict access to emergency housing and the rental properties (Jarldorn, 2020; Slatter et al., 2012). It is noted that a 'pet bond' is being introduced by the National Coalition Government as part of their 2023 coalition agreement; however, as the bond is two weeks' rent it is likely to exclude people on lower incomes (Ensor, 2023).

Structural violence, a term first used in 1969 by Galtung and Latin American liberation theologians (Farmer, 2004), is often experienced by people living in poverty. It is a form of violence in which institutions and socioeconomic systems harm certain groups of people. Galtung (1990) defined structural violence as "insults to basic human needs, and more generally to life" (p. 292). Structural violence generally entails power being applied at a distance, therefore those responsible for the oppression of others may lack of awareness of the impact of their actions (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Policies of austerity, such as benefit sanctions, are an aspect of structural violence which result in significant hardship for groups of people, their dependants and companion animals.

Methods

The findings presented in this article are from a wider doctoral study in which 23 women and five men were interviewed, using a qualitative approach, about poverty and the impact it had on their daily lives. The study participants all self-identified as living in poverty and lived in a rural district in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand. Most of the interviews were conducted in participants' homes, and in some instances companion animals were present. Of the participants interviewed, nine had companion animals.

The companion animals discussed by participants, or present during interviews, were dogs, cats and birds.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Human Ethics Committee of the University of Canterbury on 26 March 2015. As part of the ethics approval process at the University of Canterbury, the research proposal was approved by the Māori Research Advisory Group of the University of Canterbury Human Ethics Committee on January 22, 2015. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of participants.

The data were analysed using applied thematic analysis (Guest et al., 2012) and four main themes were identified: 'making ends meet'; 'relationships'; 'rural issues'; and 'oppression and violence'. This article focuses on 'companion animals' which was a sub-theme of the wider 'relationships' theme.

Findings

Participants in this study who had companion animals talked about the sense of security and friendship they experienced by having their companion animal/s. The friendship experienced by participants with their companion animals was particularly important in reducing social isolation. One participant, Nancy, who was in her 70s, talked about the conversations she had with her dog who had died. At the time of the interview, she was thinking about getting another dog for companionship as she lived alone and away from her family.

Five participants talked about the importance of the relationship they had with their dogs. Lisa was one of these participants and she planned her future with her dog in mind.

> **Lisa:** This is my dream future: to save enough money or KiwiSaver and buy a house-bus and retire into a house-bus, just me and my dog.

Participants viewed their companion animals as part of their whānau/families and they were part of their wider "social environment" (Walker et al., 2015, p. 34). Emily talked about the importance of her dogs and the role they had of protecting her son, Lucas.

> **Emily:** I've got two dogs. I've got two pitties cross huntaways'. I like my big dogs. They're so cool. They're really protective over Lucas [son]. Lucas can go outside and I can go inside and if someone turns up they will sit on either side of him until they know who it is.

Dogs can provide a sense of security and protection; this was valued when participants were living in areas where there was a heightened risk of crime. Megan had this to say about the importance of her dog and the security she provided.

> **Megan:** I got her [puppy] to grow up with the kids and for security. Being a solo mum, I want something—I want an animal. Because my kids will just go, "Hi" and they'll let some stranger in my house, so I'd want a dog to at least bark and growl and go, who are you, why are you at my mum's house, kind of thing. I got her just so she can help protect me and the kids.

In a similar vein, Ashley, who lived in a de facto relationship and had been the victim of a burglary, said this about her dog:

> **Ashley:** She's a Rottweiler cross Huntaway. We got her for security, because we were living in flats and they were just a bad place to be living and we got her for security because we got broken into.

The participants who had companion animals prioritised food for their animals over food for themselves and they went without other material goods to care for the health needs of their companion animals. For example, Megan said, "my kids also

include my animals, so they always get fed before I do" and similarly Lisa said, "on my pay days that's the first thing I do is my power, my petrol and my pet food". Food insecurity experienced by participants was evidence of structural violence as the income they received from their benefits was not enough to feed themselves, their children and their companion animals.

Ashley, who had birds as well as a dog, also talked about the cost of feeding their companion animals and was keen for her partner to get a job to help pay for pet food.

> **Ashley:** A course or something to help him get a job cos we've got a dog and two birds as well. The birds aren't too bad though, cos your seed costs $2.80 or something like that and it does them for two weeks. The dog's the expensive one.

Alongside the cost of pet food, the cost of veterinary treatment was a concern to some participants. Megan was aware of which veterinary service was the cheapest in the district and she saved to pay for veterinary services for her dog.

> **Megan:** I always make sure that I try and save money, put money aside to get them vaccinated. I'll make sure she's [puppy] at least got her first lot of vaccinations, and I'll just do what I did with my other bitch that I had—just keep her inside whenever she was on heat or keep her away from other dogs until I can afford to get her spayed.

While Megan could afford to get her puppy vaccinated, she was not in a position at the time of interview to get her puppy spayed, despite wanting to do so.

Implications for practice

It is important for social workers to recognise the significance of companion animals when working with people living in poverty. For participants in this study, their companion animals reduced their sense of isolation and helped them feel secure. For sole parent women, their dogs provided protection for their children. When carrying out social work assessments consideration should be given to the role companion animals have in the lives of people living in poverty. Companion animals should be considered as a part of people's support systems and when ecomaps are drawn consider including companion animals.

The costs of having a companion animal are a factor to be explored in assessments and included in intervention plans. The needs of companion animals should be calculated in household budgets and in requests for food grants and in food parcels supplied. Companion animals are also a factor in relation to housing and the access people have to rental properties and emergency accommodation. Companion animals' needs should also be considered when their owners enter respite or full-time care.

As poverty is a structural issue approaches which recognise its political nature such as anti-oppressive practice and critical social work are useful. These approaches encourage consciousness raising with people, supporting them to understand that poverty is a political issue not an individual failure (Hosken & Goldingay, 2016). Cause advocacy, working with, and through, social and political institutions to create change is a significant role for social workers working with people who are experiencing poverty and have companion animals. There is scope to carry this out with groups who advocate for the rights of animals such as Save Animals from Exploitation (SAFE).

Social workers can also advocate for people to be able to keep their companion animals when they move into private rental accommodation and to advocate for, and support, free or low-cost veterinary services, including vaccinations and desexing (Arluke & Rowan, 2020). The Snip 'n' Chip programme run by the SPCA New Zealand (2024) and the We Love Dogs Charitable Trust (n.d.), which has a desexing campaign providing free spaying or neutering

to applicants who have a community services or gold card, are examples of services social workers can support, advocate for and refer people to.

Companion animals were important to participants in this study for friendship and safety; however, the participants struggled with the costs of caring for their companion animals and went without food and other goods to provide for them. As social workers we can recognise the importance of people's companion animals, the support they provide and seek ways to reduce the costs of caring for a companion animal/s.

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“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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Dogs: Teachers of what matters, in social work and in life

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ABSTRACT

This article articulates personal, professional, and spiritual reflections on reverence for life, experienced through connection with animals. It links values and beliefs learned from associating with animals with social work principles as outlined in Aotearoa New Zealand Code of Ethics, while exploring how they manifest in social work praxis and lifelong learning. The article is illustrated with vignettes from the author's life, offering suggestions on how social work praxis can be enriched by the engagement of animals. Dogs, dolphins, butterflies, and pigeons feature in this unusual contribution that explores human-animal communication and its relevance for social work.

Keywords: Dogs, social values, human-animal communication, reverence for life, ako.

Introduction

This short contribution is focused on social work values based on Indigenous Māori wisdom, as adopted in Aotearoa New Zealand *Ngā Tikanga Matatika*, Code of Ethics (ANZASW, 2019), and explores how I learned the same principles from, and with, dogs who accompanied me through various periods of my life. Coincidentally, when each period finished, a dog would leave my life. I will describe how dogs contributed to my lived experience of the pou (pillars) as depicted in the *Ngā Tikanga Matatika*, which is based on Māori principles for wellbeing.

Rangatiratanga: I know who I am and what I stand for

"Social workers value diversity and cultural identity. We use our practice to advocate for and support self-determination and empowerment of others." (ANZASW, 2019, p.10)

I was always connected to animals. All animals: snails, horses, mice, birds, dolphins … but dogs …. dogs have been special to me, my kith and kin since I was born. I did not grow up with animals, as my family tried to squash my love by trying to instil fear ("a horse will kick you, a dog will bite you, a cat will scratch you, mice are disgusting, pigeons spread diseases…") and the more they tried, the more convinced I became that they were wrong. My mistrust of human words grew, and my love for animals expanded. This was probably an expression of my critical thinking and curious scepticism.

The term *rangatiratanga*—essential in our Code of Ethics and everything we do with people we work with—loosely translates as self-determination, autonomy, and a right to stand our ground and be who we truly are. It is inherited from our ancestors, and it is to be gifted to those who come after us.

Knowing who I am and where I am coming from, where my roots are and what they are connected to, what moves my heart, and where my branches spread as a metaphor for the social justice actions I undertake, is essential for my social work. Without it, I would be an extended arm of the state and an agent of social control.

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As I was born into a family without much understanding of my love of animals, and as I was born a hopeless optimist, every Christmas and every birthday, I was hoping for a dog. Any kind of dog: old, young, wounded, jumpy, friendly or aloof, and every time I would be disappointed. I 'harassed' people in the local park to walk, pet or talk with their dogs. I could tell if the dog was male or female from their facial expression, read their mood and understand what they were trying to tell me. Some were happy, some sad, some worried, some stinky; I loved them all unconditionally. I kept bringing stray dogs home, and when my mum would come home from work, they would be kicked out or taken to the animal shelter. This kept happening until I met Astor: a German shepherd I found roaming the streets on my way back from school. I called him, and he responded by following me home. I emptied the fridge and gave him water in a most precious crystal bowl (yes, I was ten years old and home alone with a 'dangerous' animal!). When my mum rang a doorbell announcing her arrival from work, he ran to the door and started barking. My mum opened the door, and he jumped at her, gluing her to the wall with his huge paws, baring his teeth. I yelled "Astor, sit!" and he immediately obeyed. Still in shock, Mum said "Take this dog back to the police station, and tomorrow we will buy a poodle." I was not too keen on a poodle, but Mum was unwilling to negotiate, and I asked "Promise?" She shakily nodded, and I returned Astor to the police station, where it was revealed that he was indeed a police dog who had strayed.

I was ten years old, and a condition of getting a dog was that I would have to take full responsibility for walking, grooming, and feeding him. Lonny taught me responsibility and discipline. He taught me the importance of being reliable and persistent, knowing what I wanted, standing my ground and following the rules, as well as discovering the joy of caring for another sentient being. I learned about diversity and cultural identities by talking to dog-walkers whom I would normally never meet otherwise. I learned about self-determination and that sometimes it requires hard work to maintain it. All my friends loved animals and nature, and my yearning for a sustainable planet where all beings live peacefully was natural to me.

When I was 16, I went skiing and left Lonny with my family. I was told that he disappeared. His disappearance is still a mystery; he either tried to find me and got lost, or my family intervened, hoping that I would find more human friends and stop talking with animals. From Lonny, I learned to, appreciate reverence for life, and found an awareness that all beings are sentient. I learned that intelligence is universal and that biology determines how it is expressed. In other words, if I were born as a slug, I would do what a slug does. We are who we are, and the more we fight it, the more likely it is that we will lose ourselves. I learned that self-determination is essential for reciprocal, respectful relationships. Lonny left, and with him, my childhood. At the age of sixteen, my life became more complicated, conflicts with family members and teachers became more common, and my interest in art, music, and alternative theatre became more important than mainstream society's narrow and boring path.

Figure 1: Lonny, who disappeared together with my childhood

Manaakitanga: Who we are determines how we host life

"Social workers recognise and support the mana of others. We act towards others with respect, kindness and compassion. We practice empathic solidarity, ensure safe space, acknowledge boundaries and meet obligations." (ANZASW, 2019, p.11)

I was just over 16 when Pacha was returned to her mum and her mum's owner because she was allegedly unmanageable. Her previous human described her as so destructive and untrainable that she had to tie her up to a kitchen table. I brought her home knowing that my family would not show any manaakitanga, but I had to try. My grandma chased her with a broom, and my mum immediately exclaimed "Out with her!" Pacha put her head on my mum's foot and looked up with puppy dog eyes, and Mum said "OK, till tomorrow morning". She stayed for 13 years until she died when I was 29. She captured my mum's heart as she knew how to do it with grace and integrity. She accompanied me in my weird, wonderful and wild years. She never needed a leash and followed me everywhere; I would smuggle her on trams, busses, and to my classes when I started studying social work. She was a regular at all parties, would sit on my lap when I played cards, enjoyed being surrounded by all the joys of wild living in the '70s and '80s, and hitchhiked with me around Europe. When a car stopped, she would inspect it first, sniff the air, and then give me a signal if it was safe to enter. She never failed, and I never had any bad experiences hitchhiking, assuming that only kind people would stop for a hitchhiking dog. She taught me about friendships, relationships, hospitality, and how to walk on a tightrope, have unforgettable adventures, stay safe, hold space for others, and be a mother. This learning was reciprocal; I had to take care of her fully, and she took care of me. She was also a most devoted mother to a litter of five puppies, and demonstrated more feminine qualities than I ever had.

As she was my companion while I was becoming a social worker, learning about expressing kindness in professional settings, ensuring safety and respecting boundaries was a perfectly natural thing for her to do, and I had to learn that while hitchhiking. Drivers would open their souls as they knew that they would never see me again. I also had to learn English fast. When I was not travelling, I studied and worked with young people. Pacha's presence bridged many rivers and reconciled many differences between me and some of my clients. She was also the first dog to "graduate" from the University of Zagreb and receive a certificate of completion; however, she was not allowed to attend the graduation ceremony. When I started working, I had never met someone who could not connect with her, and her presence was a great icebreaker for new clients. She was the wisest dog I ever had.

When she took her last breath, I looked into her eyes and said, "We will meet again; I will recognise your eyes", and she responded telepathically "NO – it is time for you to have children!" and then closed her eyes. That finished the wildest and the riskiest period in my life.

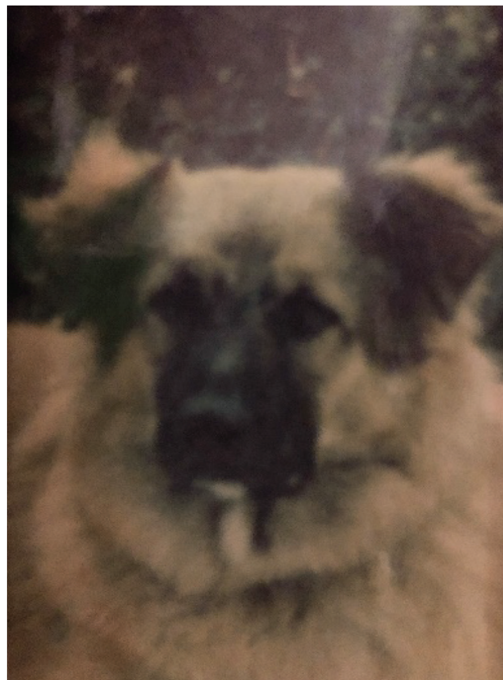
Figure 2: Pacha in a car we hitched in, somewhere in Germany.

Whanaungatanga: Making and growing babies in love

"Social workers work to strengthen reciprocal mana-enhancing relationships, connectedness and to foster a sense of belonging and inclusion." (ANZASW, 2019. p.11)

I was 29, accomplished and independent, but not keen to be in a committed relationship. At my friend's birthday party, I overheard a guy talking about his "little democrat". I thought he was talking about his son, but I soon realised that he was talking about a dog. I flippantly said "You have a dog? My dear dog Pacha recently died. Please call me when you walk your dog; I am so missing dog walks!" as much as this sounded like a come-on, I was genuinely interested only in his dog Teddy, but it seems that life force had other plans. The man called the next day, and I played with his dog like a child, running on the field and completely ignoring the man. Two hours later, I felt somewhat guilty as I had not paid any attention to his human who provided me with the joy of playing with Teddy, and I invited them for a cup of tea at my place. Teddy (a well-toilet-trained dog) peed at my little flat's entrance and exit, marking his territory. He moved in (together with his human) soon after. Teddy taught me about the importance of following my intuition, being light-hearted, letting go of my barriers and being present. He was a Norwegian spitz cross, incredibly charming and strong-willed. I was married to his human for 25 years and had two sons with him. His human was also charming, strong-willed, and sometimes kind and loving, just like Teddy. Teddy initiated the creation of our family and was incredibly gentle and mindful with our first son, who learned how to walk by holding on to his fur. Teddy got killed in a horrific event just a month before we left a war-torn Yugoslavia and moved to Aotearoa New Zealand. His death was a metaphor for what potentially could happen to us if we stayed. Leaving my whanau and friends was surprisingly easy, as the pull to Aotearoa New Zealand was so strong. I soon realised that whanau connections go much deeper than mere physical presence. With some, I became more connected when I left, and my mum was a regular visitor. Teddy taught me about the importance of whanau, its biological and chosen features, commitment, energy utilisation, and the ability to choose a path that gives more light, life, and laughter. His death marked the end of my life in Croatia, and the start of my life as a working mother and wife.

Figure 3: Teddy – a matchmaker, connector, babysitter and protector



Kotahitanga and Wairuatanga: Being at the right time, in the right place, doing the right thing

"Social workers work to build a sense of community, solidarity and collective action for social change. We challenge injustice and oppression in all its forms, including exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence." (ANZASW, 2019. p. 12)

"Social workers attend to the wellbeing – spiritual, emotional, psychological and physical – of self and others. We acknowledge the

significance of whakapapa, self-awareness and self-care." (ANZASW, 2019. p.14.)

These two pillars have merged, as my sense of spirituality is inseparable from social justice, a sense of oneness with the universe, community social action, and social transformation; as well as the importance of challenging oppression, discrimination and any form of misuse of power. Community development and community action seem to be the only true social work, while everything else appears to be mere firefighting. Principles of kotahitanga and wairuatanga integrate love, justice and wisdom, including human and more than human endeavours, enabling us to perceive beyond our five senses and challenging expressions of discriminatory and dogmatic behaviours hidden behind authoritarian expressions of spirituality. Mechanistic, outcomes- and outputs-oriented social work misses the importance of idiosyncracies, context, historical injustices, the creation of meaningful connections and the co-creation of transformation in the communities we serve.

When we, as a small family of three, landed at Mangere airport in 1995, the moment I touched the ground, I felt the wairua of Aotearoa New Zealand without even knowing what wairua meant. Ponga trees, kauri, rimu and totara, birds, long white clouds, people smiling on the streets, the calm Pacific Ocean and the rough Tasman Sea enveloped me. I felt truly at home for the first time in my life, which was weird as I was in a 'foreign' land. I wondered why I felt like a stranger in my own land and at home in a foreign one. I arrived in Aotearoa New Zealand believing that in this beautiful green and blue country, not only Māori and settlers (colonisers) live in peace, but they even welcome newcomers like me. I read everything I could find about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and it seemed to me that Aotearoa New Zealand was an amazingly appreciative country; I had not seen anything like that in my travels. This illusionary bubble was quickly busted, and I realised that being a social worker and a fighter for social justice, I still had a job to do in challenging injustice and oppression, and confronting cultural hegemony and discrimination existent even here, in 'paradise'. Deep resonance with Māori culture enabled me to tickle my roots and explore how my culture shaped who I am and how it impacts my social work practice. Life looked optimistic, but we were renting, and dogs were not welcome.

The moment we paid a deposit for a house, I reserved a Rhodesian ridgeback mastiff cross puppy, Mia, who was coincidentally ready for a pickup on our settlement day. The dog's presence turned a house into a home and confirmed Aotearoa New Zealand as my forever home. Mia was a true family dog. She loved playing a game of Ludo with us, taking the dice in her mouth and spitting it, patiently waiting for her turn. She was a balm for the family and a companion in my life from when I was 33 to 45, during which time I raised my two children. I learnt about adjustment to a new country; family life; the meaning of home and belonging; how to be calm in a storm; how to accommodate and still be true to core values of rangatiratanga, manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, aroha, kotahitanga, mātātoa and wairuatanga. When things would get tough, we would go for a walk, and Mia would transport me to another dimension, where values and principles were more important than everyday 'raruraru'. In the year 2000, I developed a strong longing to give birth to another child. It was irrational, spiritual and visceral. Mia delivered two puppies on my partner's birthday; our second son was born nine months later. Mia showed me that delivering new life to this world can be peaceful, gentle and easy. This is exactly how my second son's welcome to this world was. When Mia's time to leave this world arrived, we asked her if it was the time, and she confirmed. An old dog who hated vet visits and could not walk staggered to the car, walked into the vet's surgery and gave him her paw for her final injection. We were all

Figure 4: Mia, keeping a family together, smoothing rough edges, inspiring kotahitanga.

with her, and her spirit and the appreciation of the unity of all life she represented stayed with me forever.

During this period, I realised the importance of collective action for social change. We attended protests together; I learned about specific ways colonisation happened in Aotearoa and how to listen to the spirit of this land of a long white cloud that was speaking to me through its waves, winds and ponga trees.

Mātātoa – the courage to challenge

"Social workers act with moral courage in situations that are uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain. We use critical reflection and questioning to work through contradictions and complexity." (ANZASW, 2019. p.13)

I could not even think of getting another dog for six months, but then I started missing the dog's presence in the house. I wanted a dog completely different from Mia, and I envisaged a little Hairy Maclary type of dog, preferably female. I called a dog shelter, and they had just what I wanted: a little, hairy, black female. When I saw her, we did not connect, but then I felt guilty for not picking her up. Shelter workers reassured me that small dogs find homes fast, but bigger dogs are more of a challenge. I went around to see other dogs, and there he was—big, white with orange blotches, male—and everything opposite to what I wanted. I fell in love instantly. Bili was abused and neglected, found roaming the streets, and nobody claimed him. He was sick, and we could pick him up only after he recovered and got snipped. He was about six months old, and his story of abuse slowly unfolded. He showed me that he was abused by little children and loved by teenagers. He was fun and loving but would have unpredictable, angry outbursts. Walking with him was stressful, and I had to be on alert, but at the same time, he was the most grateful, loving and communicative dog. He even had a large orange heart that would sprout on his body when he would lie down and relax. He accompanied me from when I was 46 to 58, during the most challenging part of my life. He helped me to work through all the personal, ancestral and political trauma that I experienced. He exemplified everything that was wrong in our family; he was perfectly imperfect, vulnerable and resilient, the same as my family in that period. He escorted me to come to the other end and stayed with me until my heart was healed. He also affirmed and confirmed my belief that death is just a transition. He returned as a white butterfly just to let me know he was OK.

One morning in May, I was walking him at Mairangi Bay before going to work, and we noticed a pod of bottlenose dolphins frolicking around a woman on a paddle board. I tied him up to the bench, stripped into my tights and bra and dived in. It was one of the most transformative experiences in my life. I swam with a pod of at least 25 wild dolphins, and confirmed that life should be lived without unnecessary inhibitions and that uncomfortable, challenging and uncertain situations provide an opportunity

Figure 5: Bili sprouting a heart while sleeping

Figure 6: Touched to tears, a moment of recognition

for learning while courageous actions and conversations are part of bringing forth the world. Love and courage are part of the same life principle. Bili taught me how to use my power for empowerment. He also taught me how trauma blocks the expression of our true nature, as fear blocks and distorts our perceptions and our behaviour. I also learnt to stop making excuses for irresponsible and unacceptable behaviours, personally and professionally.

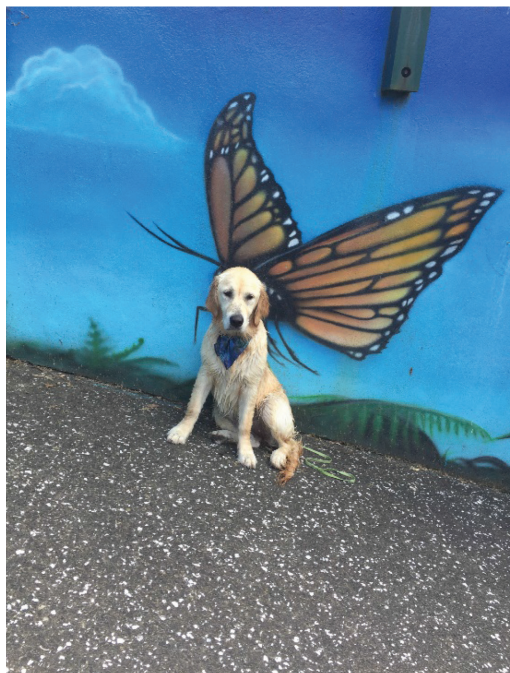
Aroha: Life is love manifested

"Social workers acknowledge our mutual responsibility for wellbeing. We recognise our common humanity with people who use our services and hold people to account, using professional judgment without being judgemental. We focus on people's strengths and finding solutions." (ANZASW, 2019. p.12)

Māia means courage in Te Reo Māori; in Greek mythology, she is one of the Pleiades connected to motherhood, and in Hindu mythology, Maya represents an illusion or a dream. In Slavic mythology, Maja (Maya) is the force that gives life, a goddess of nature and spring. Māia is the first dog who came into my life without trauma, and coincidentally, my life is very peaceful now. When I went to see her (as I could not possibly get a dog without meeting her first), she was a week-old blind puppy, and her mum's human put a little purple collar on her when I expressed my interest over the phone. Eleven seven-day-old puppies were sleeping on the heap. When I knelt beside the whelping box, Māia, a little blind puppy, crawled to me. How did she know that I was her person?

She's taught me about gratefulness, loving life and being in the flow. She accompanies me during professional supervision, and I take her to my classes whenever possible, especially for field trips. Life is about love in the widest possible sense, and our theories and models help us as practitioners to organise our thoughts and build competence, which is then followed by confidence. Still, our theories and models are of little use for tangata whai ora (people who seek well-being). What makes our interactions

Figure 7: Māia, helping humans to grow their wings.



transformative is our ability to connect, be fully present, show aroha and be a wealth of useful, practical information. To be able to do that, we need our theories and models to organise our thoughts coherently and helpfully, but if our hearts are frozen, blocked, or we are turned into bureaucratic calculators, we will not be able to provide a safe space for transformation. This transformational process is reciprocal and mutual. We learn from relationships with all beings: human, not human, and more than human.

My dog companions taught me about reverence for life, enabled me to deeply experience social work values and principles in every encounter, and encouraged me to take life spiritedly.

The link between the pou of the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics and my life with dogs may seem unusual; however, this article aimed to demonstrate that the Code of Ethics is not something to be obeyed or learned, it needs to be lived and experienced. These pillars are a foundation of my personal, professional, political, and spiritual life and are reflected in my interactions with humans and with all manifestations of life.

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Care farms, social work and animals: A cautionary tale

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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;

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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 carefully 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.

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