

Social Work, Animal-Assisted Therapies and Ethical Considerations: A Programme Example from Central Queensland, Australia

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Abstract

Animals are increasingly being used in a range of social work settings and extant research demonstrates they can offer a wide range of benefits to humans. With other professions, social work is oriented towards caring for people but does not officially recognise (non-human) animals. Given the rise in animal-related interventions and emergence of veterinary social work, we argue that this needs to change. We recognise that obstacles to change include social work's history of dichotomising (or falsely dividing) humans from animals, and focusing exclusively on human experiences of social problems (such as poverty). Using a programme example of a canine-assisted therapy project for child sexual abuse victims/survivors in Bundaberg (Central Queensland, Australia), we consider some of the ethical and practical issues associated with animal-assisted therapies (AATs). We examine whether AATs can benefit both humans and animals by positively changing people's attitudes and behaviours towards animals. We argue that the ethical legitimacy of AATs rests on their willingness to understand animals as sentient beings with needs of their own, not just possessions or tools for humans to use.

Keywords: Human/animal divide, animal-assisted therapies, social work codes of ethics, child sexual abuse

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Introduction

Historically, social work has focused on poverty and other social problems associated with it (Mullaly, 2007). It has done so within a humanist intellectual framework focusing on humans exclusively, separate and distinct from non-human animals (Ryan, 2011). We argue that now is the time to officially recognise social work's relationship to non-human animals. With the rise in the number of therapies using animals, there are pressing ethical issues that cannot continue to be ignored. Approaches that recognise the intersectionality of oppressions offer longer-term solutions in, between and across the human/animal divide (Ryan, 2011). Data from a small canine-assisted therapy project in Australia are presented to illustrate some of the practical and ethical issues of using animals in therapeutic settings. This highlights the problems of locating animals simply as tools to help humans and allows a consideration of whether animal-assisted therapies (AATs) and interventions can help both humans and animals. We conclude that, if professionals are going to employ animals in these settings, consideration must be given to the animals' well-being and that a useful first step would be to start to reference human–animal relations in social work codes of ethics.

Social work, animals and ethics

Social work's hallmark values are social justice (Brown and Strega, 2005; Dominelli, 2009; Mullaly, 2007) and empathy (Gerdes and Segal, 2011). Mendes (2005), in a review of Australian social work history, identifies examples of social justice and empathy in action through the social activism by past social workers concerned about the plight of devalued and disadvantaged groups. McMahon (2003) conducts a similar review, rightfully recognising some important struggles for social change. However, missing are examples of social workers empathising with, or advocating for, non-human animals. This is not because Mendes (2005) or McMahon (2003) have ignored them but because social work's historical focus has rested so firmly on human beings.

Of course, many individual social workers are interested in animals and animals may play a part in their practice. Social workers may also live with companion animals and care about those kept by clients and people in their local communities. Some social workers are vegetarian or vegan specifically because they do not want to eat animals and participate in the farming and processing of meat. Some engage in lobbying activities and environmental protests related to the protection of wildlife habitat. Some are aware of the entanglement of animal abuse with human abuse as in the case of links between familial violence and animal cruelty (Becker and French, 2004). Even those social workers not acquainted with or involved in work that incorporates animals, such as dogs, cats, horses and dolphins, may appreciate the

emotional, psychological and physical benefits humans can derive from connections to other animals (Evans and Gray, 2012).

However, there is no formal acknowledgement of animals by the profession in Anglo-American-dominated societies (such as Australia, Britain, Canada and the USA). Animals are not mentioned in the Australian Association of Social Workers' (AASW, 2010) *Code of Ethics* that articulates three central values: (i) respect for persons; (ii) social justice; and (iii) professional integrity. Since the previous code in 2003, there is now recognition of the (physical and geographical) environment (AASW, 2010). Yet, it has remained silent on animal welfare, rights or well-being, and their connections with or benefits to human beings. The same applies to the British Association of Social Workers' (BASW, 2012) *Code of Ethics* that also foregrounds social justice through 'challenging discrimination', 'recognising diversity', 'distributing resources', 'challenging unjust policies and practices' and 'working in solidarity'. Animals, including those who assist social workers in the course of their work, are excluded in these codes and all others consulted (ANZASW, 2013; CASW, 2005; IFSW, 2012; NASW, 2008).

As Ryan points out:

The omission of any individual, group or issue sends a loud and incontrovertible message that any and all of the aforementioned *do not matter*, that their interests are trivial, and that we ought to concern ourselves with more pressing issues. Social work's dogmatic anthropocentrism is metaphysical, conceptualising ourselves as different in kind from all other animals, and it serves to obscure our understanding of the human animal. It is assumed, not argued, that human beings are the measure of all things. And it is this absence that has particular implications for our consideration of the interests of animals (Ryan, 2011, p. 5, emphasis in original).

Social work's professional silence on animals means there is little talk about or guidance for how we might conceptualise and work with animals across contexts and lifespan. Our discussions of animals and human connections to animals are likely to be held in corridors or lunch rooms rather than at staff meetings and staff training seminars. They are more likely to be ad hoc personal chats with co-workers or clients rather than structured, more reflexive conversations. While individual social workers' interest in anything 'animal-related' may not be extinguished by its invisibility in professional codes of ethics and organisational policies, it is likely to be marginalised and considered outside of core business. In part, this is due to our intellectual legacy of humanism that rests upon assumptions of anthropocentrism and human mastery over nature.

Anthropocentrism and inequality

Social work's long-standing practice of assuming human distinctiveness from, and superiority over, other animals (Ryan, 2011) reflects the much wider

civilising project (Elias, 2000) that has set humans apart from other animals. Policing the boundaries between human and other animals has been a modern preoccupation across secular and religious divides. Social work's Judaeo-Christian underpinnings have meant it has been influenced by culturally embedded beliefs about human's (natural and God-given) dominion over animals. It connects directly with the privileging (or overvaluing) of white, middle-class, heterosexual and able-bodied males.

Just as animals and humans are divorced from each other and placed in a hierarchy, so too have men been placed in opposition to women, whites from people of colour, and heterosexuals from homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals. Science, especially rationalist empiricism, has often been used to 'verify' the assumed natural superiority of straight white men (Brown and Strega, 2005). Anthropocentrism, or the automatic privileging of human interests over all other animals, reproduces social inequality among people not just other animals (see, e.g. Adams and Donovan, 1995; Taylor, 2011). The extent of anthropocentrism is reflected in the easy ways people may be denigrated by comparison with animals. Illustrative of this are stereotypical insults used in countries such as Australia and England to describe people as pigs (greedy and dirty), sheep (unthinking fools), sloths (lazy and unmotivated), snakes or dirty dogs (sly and cunning). Gender-specific insults reflect the overlap between the oppression of women and the oppression of non-human animals, such as women being described as catty (spiteful), bitches (malicious) or cows (unpleasant and large-bottomed) (for more on language and multiple oppressions, see Dunayer, 2001). Racially specific insults, such as describing people of colour as apes, monkeys or gorillas, plays a similar function by extending white privilege and insulting both humans and animals in the process (for more on this, see Spiegel, 1997).

It is not coincidental that attempts are made to tame or domesticate socially devalued groups (such as working-class young people, single parents and members of visible minorities) who, as Beddoe (2013) notes, are periodically represented in the media as 'feral' (similar to terms such as chav and trailer trash). As Ritvo (1987) demonstrates, some of the first considerations of animal welfare were motivated more by policing and repressing the working class than they were by helping animals. Being feral has multiple meanings, including being constituted as unruly, wild, barbaric and at times a form of pestilence requiring suppression, if not eradication. Ecofeminists have argued convincingly that this idea underpins the oppression of women in that they are seen as 'closer to nature' and in need of 'domesticating' (e.g. Gaard, 1993).

Future social work does not have to exclude animals nor be anthropocentric any more than it needs to be ageist, heterosexist, racist or sexist. As Dominelli (2009, p. 2) explains that '[c]hange is a constant feature of social work'. Social work's recognition of people in their environments provides the impetus for us to think about the environment in relation to more than people's interpersonal psychological and economic worlds. It needs to

include an appreciation of how negative stereotypes of animals devalue both animals and the humans most closely associated with them. It calls for us to appreciate the habitat requirements of multiple species, not just human beings, and give due consideration to ecology and ecological change (Evans and Gray, 2012).

Increasing evidence of the effects of anthropogenic climate change that disproportionately affect the world's poor and disenfranchised means that social work needs to urgently reconsider its silence on animals and the attendant anthropocentric framework. Discussions with Indigenous social workers in countries such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the USA (see Gray *et al.*, 2008) might help, not just because they have collectively experienced much poverty and social exclusion, but also because their relationships with, and comparisons to, animals have had distinctly different and often positive spiritual meanings.

We are aware that pragmatic, not just philosophical and political, arguments may be mustered against social work recognising human–animal relations. For instance, it might be argued that, as a consequence of welfare austerity measures, social workers have more than enough to do and insufficient resources to deal with human problems, let alone extending attention to other species. Besides, where would we draw the line? Would we only attend to warm-blooded animals, or all animals, including insects? What positions might we take on farming animals, commodifying animal products and meat eating; keeping animals in zoos or cages? Even if we narrow the field and exclude some of these questions, we might wonder whether we should include all sentient beings, or only those with whom we feel a connection or bond. Who gets to define whether an animal is sentient and when a connection becomes a bond? At best, the argument may be made that we only have the time and attention to try to ensure that animals are not treated cruelly.

There are many problems inherent in the above-mentioned considerations. For instance, similar arguments are advanced by affluent nations as a justification for reductions in their foreign aid allocations. Why help alleviate others' suffering when we have suffering among 'our own people'? We know that it is not in keeping with our commitment to social justice to disqualify people from aid simply because they live far away or are different from 'us'. Our commitment to pursue social justice means that we do not get to side-step issues or groups because they are morally problematic. Being too busy or preoccupied to deal with ethical dilemmas (McAuliffe, 2005) is no defence either. If that were the case, then sexual assault workers might have said that they were too busy dealing with women and girls' experience of abuse to take on new work with abused boys and men, including those abused by the clergy.

Social work needs to examine its anthropocentric framework irrespective of the demands this may place upon the profession because animals are important to large numbers of people, including clients of all ages, as well as to social workers themselves (Evans and Gray, 2012; Menzies Inc., 2003).

A useful step forward would be to acknowledge animals in future social work codes of ethics, starting with those animals that assist social workers in performing their roles. [Risley-Curtiss \(2010\)](#) argues that companion animals need to become integrated into social work theory and practice for three main reasons: (i) they are part of family systems, (ii) there is a growing evidence base that animal cruelty is linked to other forms of family dysfunction and abuse, and (iii) companion animals can have positive therapeutic benefit to people across diverse age and lifespan groups.

Perhaps the most compelling argument for including animals in social work's purview is because animals have already made their way into social work modes and fields of practice ([Tedeshi et al., 2005](#)). Ignoring them is no longer legitimate, if it ever was. Accordingly, we cannot ethically promote therapeutic interventions with clients that use animals simply as 'tools' without regard to their needs or interests ([Tedeshi et al., 2005](#)). Nor can we assume these discussions only apply to those involved with veterinary social work and/or other animal-assisted interventions.

Veterinary social work and animal interventions

At the [University of Tennessee \(2014\)](#), veterinary social work (VSW) is defined as 'an area of social work practice that attends to the human needs that arise in the intersection of veterinary medicine and social work practice'. The boundaries of VSW are set within the scope of human–animal relations while adhering to existing social work codes of ethics ([Strand et al., 2012](#)). The four areas of VSW are: (i) grief and pet loss, (ii) animal-assisted interactions, (iii) the link between human and animal violence and (iv) compassion fatigue management, for people working with animals that are abused, neglected and/or need to be euthanised (see www.vet.utk.edu/socialwork/about/index.php).

Interventions focusing on animals, or involving them directly, usually fall into three categories, which may overlap: (i) animal-assisted therapies (AATs), (ii) animal-assisted interventions (AAIs) and (iii) humane education programmes (HEPs) ([Arbour et al., 2009](#)). Formally designed by professionals and mostly involving trained animal handlers, these three sets of interventions go beyond everyday companion animal keeping, which is also important to social work but beyond the scope of this paper.

AATs include the presence of animals in therapy sessions because they can provide a bridge into therapeutic alliances, as clients may find it easier to engage with an animal before transferring this alliance on to the therapist ([Karol, 2007](#); [Geist, 2011](#)). Animals work well with abused children because they can provide unconditional positive regard without judgement—something the children may not have otherwise experienced ([Reichert, 1998](#); [Thompson and Gullone, 2003](#)).

AAIs involve a broader range of non-clinical activities for instance in residential children's homes (Evans and Gray, 2012) or juvenile detention centres, and the first prison-based dog-training scheme which involved inmates training dogs with behavioural problems to help them get re-homed (BBC, 2010).

HEPs focus on animals but do not necessarily involve them directly in the teaching environment. Grounded in moral philosophy (Thomas and Beirne, 2002), they may be used to teach children kindness to animals so as to effect animal-directed empathy, which in turn is thought to increase human-directed empathy and reduce anti-social and violent/aggressive behaviour (Thompson and Gullone, 2003; Nicoll *et al.*, 2008; Arbour *et al.*, 2009).

The emergence of VSW and AAIs is reflective of the growing interest in human–animal relationships. In particular, the psychological, physical and social benefits of interaction with animals have been studied and documented (Tedeshi *et al.*, 2005). Animals can play a role in helping humans in most walks of life. Studies have demonstrated that humans who live with animals and have a close relationship with them realise many benefits from those relationships. For example, people keeping companion animals are more active in old age (Raina *et al.*, 1999), have lower cholesterol levels (Anderson *et al.*, 1992) and overcome depression more readily than those who do not live with companion animals (Garrity *et al.*, 1989). Additionally, animals have been shown to offer benefits to specific groups such as the elderly, where animal-assisted therapy and animal-visitation schemes have been shown to decrease agitated behaviour and increase social interaction in geriatric dementia patients (Perkins *et al.*, 2008) and can help reduce depression in elderly populations (Souter and Miller, 2007).

Animal-based interventions have also been shown to work particularly well with young populations and Indigenous groups because of their flexibility and ability to accommodate cultural differences (e.g. Kemp *et al.*, 2014). Katcher and Wilkins (2000) reported that children diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and conduct disorder who participated in an animal-assisted education programme demonstrated several improvements including decreased anti-social and violent behaviour. Anderson and Olson (2006) reported that having a dog in a classroom with students diagnosed with a variety of behavioural problems led to a de-escalation of aggressive behaviour and encouraged them to regulate their emotions appropriately. AAIs are also being held to be a particularly useful method of working with children with Autism Spectrum Disorder where numerous studies have shown that children who participate in AAIs are more aware of their environment (Martin and Farnum, 2002) and are more socially interactive (Sams *et al.*, 2006).

This interest in the therapeutic benefits of animals connects to wider interest in human–animal bonds more generally, as seen in the establishment of formal professional bodies dedicated to the study of human–animal relations. The Section on Human Animal Interaction: Research and Practice, of Division 17 (Society of Counselling Psychology) of the American

Psychological Association and the Animal/Human Studies Group of the British Sociological Association are key examples. The growth in courses addressing human–animal relations also speaks to their importance academically, societally and personally (Shapiro and DeMello, 2010).

However, one of the major criticisms of the increased interest in the human–animal bond is that animals still tend to be conceived of as tools to help human ‘dysfunction’ (Taylor and Signal, 2008). This is not a position social work can afford to take, for, if we acknowledge that animals are sentient beings who exist not solely for our benefit, then we need to think about the ethics of if and how we ‘utilise them’. We must first be prepared to consider whether it is legitimate to include them in any therapeutic interventions aimed at helping humans (Zamir, 2006). If it is possible—and we think it is—what circumstances and considerations are required? Stafford and Mellor (2009) identify five domains of basic needs: (i) nutrition; (ii) environment, such as protection from extremes of temperature; (iii) health; (iv) behaviour, such as sufficient stimulation and contact to avoid boredom, anxiety, frustration and loneliness; and (v) mental state, such as subjective experiences of pleasure and avoidance of pain. Inherent in all these domains is the need for humans to ensure that the animals performing therapeutic roles have their own needs and interests recognised, not just those of the humans they are serving. Admittedly, this is a welfare approach that leaves certain moral and philosophical questions under considered (Zamir, 2006). While the very notion of human *use* of animals for human benefit is morally problematic, we believe the proliferation of AAIs necessitates that we address this somewhat pragmatically in the first instance.

In addition to considering the well-being of the animals involved in such programmes, we also believe that these initiatives should not solely be about human benefit. Programmes to prevent human cruelty to animals (CTA) are as necessary as programmes employing animals to help humans deal with the effects of abuse. We are convinced by the burgeoning literature (for an overview, see Becker and French, 2004; Flynn, 2012) which points to links at a systemic level between human and animal oppression. We must view animals (and all oppressed *Others*) as subjects, not objects. Designing programmes where animals are configured simply as ‘tools’ undermines longer-term goals of equity. However, human and animal benefits do not need to be mutually exclusive. We show this through consideration of a recent canine-assisted intervention programme run through Phoenix House, a sexual assault referral service in Bundaberg, Queensland, Australia.

Programme example: Phoenix House, Central Queensland

This paper reports on a larger study involving Phoenix House (PH), the Queensland Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) and academics from two universities. Ethical permission to

collect data from human participants was granted by CQUniversity HREC (H05/02–28). Elsewhere, we have reported on the multiple measures used to assess changes in the PH AAT programme participants' management of trauma. In this article, we focus not on how the animals in the programme helped the participants, but on responses to measures of cruelty to animals (CTA), namely how the programme potentially benefits animals. It is a focus that recognises animals not just as tools or useful forms of labour, but as sentient beings in their own right. Part of the rationale for the AAT programme was to assess whether it promoted more pro-animal welfare-friendly attitudes in those who took part. One of the reasons this project was initiated was concern from the social workers at PH about care-givers fostering children who might be harming family companion animals.

Animal-assisted therapy programme at Phoenix House

The study took place at PH, a community organisation located in Bundaberg (Australia), publicly funded by state and federal governments. Taking a public health approach to sexual violence, it focuses attention upon the prevention of sexual violence, as well as providing services to people at risk of, or directly harmed by, sexual violence. The AAT programme was one of a number of PH programmes and not the central focus of the agency.

Phoenix House research design and analysis

Quantitative data collected throughout the project involved twenty children (eleven boys and nine girls), aged between five and twelve years. Given the competing needs for rigorous evaluation while maintaining ethical and professional goals particularly in regard to withholding or delaying services to an at-risk group, a quasi-experimental, repeated-measure design was utilised here. This approach has been employed by other researchers assessing treatments for abused or at-risk children (e.g. [Lanktree and Briere, 1995](#); [Tsai et al., 2010](#)). Changes between Time 1 (intake into service) and Time 2 (pre-AAT) scores were compared to those between Time 2 (pre-AAT) and Time 3 (post-AAT) to account for maturation, time since abuse cessation and/or other variables that may mask the actual efficacy of the AAT. Statistical analyses, specifically analysis of the variance of change scores from Time 1 to Time 2 and Time 2 to Time 3, utilised the cohort as an 'analysis unit' ([Cooper et al., 2009](#)), giving an overall indication of treatment efficacy.

Phoenix House AAT programme

In brief, three groups of five to seven children began the ten-week AAT programme with three, weekly, visits to the local RSPCA shelter. There they

interacted with one of three dogs that had been behaviourally assessed prior to the intervention. These interactions also occurred under the supervision of RSPCA and PH staff at all times.

During these visits, a specialised RSPCA education officer delivered hands-on lessons to the children. The lessons were designed to model and reinforce appropriate behaviours with dogs, such as safely approaching and appropriately touching them, and using positive reinforcement techniques to 'train' the dogs to sit. Other topics such as animal feelings and well-being were also discussed with the children. For the remaining seven weeks of the programme, children worked with a social worker from PH transferring the skills and lessons from the first three weeks from animal to human interactions. Weeks 4–10 specifically focused on human-directed empathy, body language and feelings, managing emotions, non-verbal and verbal communication, self-soothing, developing and respecting boundaries and asking for support and developing support networks.

Supported by their care-givers, the child participants undertook psychometric assessments at three points in time (intake into PH, pre-AAT and post-AAT). In this paper, we are reporting on selected items from the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL) and the Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI). The CBCL is a care-giver report questionnaire used to rate levels of maladaptive, social and emotional, behavioural problems in pre-school children now or within the last six months (Achenbach, 1991). It can be used to indicate levels of internalising (anxious, depressive and over-controlled) and externalising (i.e. aggressive, hyperactive, noncompliant and under-controlled) behaviours as well as a total problem score. It includes a single item 'cruel to animals' (0 = not true (as far as you know), 1 = somewhat or sometimes true, 2 = very true or often true). This one question has been used to estimate the prevalence of CTA in various groups of children (e.g. Achenbach *et al.*, 1991). The CSBI (Friedrich, 1998) is a thirty-eight-item care-giver report measure of sexual behaviour in children. It is only intended for use with children who have either been, or suspected of having been, sexually abused. It includes one item that asks whether the child 'touches animals' sex parts' (0 = never, 1 = less than one/month, 2 = one to three times/month, 3 = at least one/week).

Phoenix House results

Eight of the twenty child participants (40 per cent) were reported by their care-givers (in the CBCL) to be engaging in some level of CTA at the time of completing the checklist or within the last six months. Of these eight children, six (five boys and a girl) were given '2' (very true or often true) at the first of the three assessments. The remaining two children were reported to be 'somewhat or sometimes' cruel to animals. Two children (a boy and girl) were scored '1' (somewhat or sometimes true) at the first assessment point.

The other twelve children were not reported to be cruel to animals, but they did show significant psychological symptomatology as a result of their abusive experiences, as we have reported elsewhere (Signal *et al.*, 2013).

Presented in Figure 1 are the care-giver ratings across Times 1 to 3 for the eight children reported as cruel to animals. Cases 3 and 6 denote the two girls in this subgroup. Cases 3, 5 and 6 have fewer than three bars due to their cruelty to animal rating falling to zero. While half the children showed no change in CTA between Time 1 (intake) and Time 2 (pre-AAT), four children (Cases 1, 2, 5 and 7) showed a drop in CTA between Time 1 and Time 2 (i.e. prior to AAT). A test of within-subject contrasts indicated that overall there was a non-significant difference ($F(1,6) = 3.0, p > 0.05$) between Time 1 and Time 2 in CTA ratings. However, the difference between Time 2 and Time 3 was statistically significant ($F(1,6) = 16.5, p < 0.01, r = 0.86$). By Time 3 (post-AAT), care-givers rated all eight of these children as engaging less frequently in behaviours identified as cruel to animal behaviours. This decrease proved statistically significant (via Repeated Measures ANOVA, $F(2,12) = 24.682, p < 0.001$). In other words, as the programme unfolded, children's empathy to animals strengthened and their likelihood of being cruel to them reduced, suggesting that, over time, one of the programme goals was taking effect.

Another intriguing finding, which needs to be treated with caution due to the small sample size, is that there were gender and time effects, with girls showing significantly greater change in overall CTA ratings than boys ($F(2,12) = 5.045, p < 0.05$). This finding warrants further investigation.

Child Sexual Behavior Inventory (CSBI): touching animal parts

Of the twenty children, six (30 per cent) were reported as touching animals 'inappropriately'. This included five boys and one girl. Two of these six children were not otherwise rated as cruel to animals. Overall, only two of the six children engaging in the sexual touching of animals showed an improvement following the animal-assisted programme. Both were boys, reported to have shown high levels of sexual touching, at least once a week, before undertaking the programme. By Time 3, namely post-AAT intervention, this touching dropped to less than once per month. Importantly, both boys' caretakers also rated them as frequently engaging in behaviour that was cruel to animals (see Cases 1 and 7 in Figure 1). The remainder of the children reported to be sexually touching animals at the outset of the programme either failed to show improvement, one boy and one girl persisted at a rate of less than once per month or reduced this behaviour to zero before the programme started.

Along with the CSBI, we gathered feedback from care-givers at the conclusion of the ten-week programme. Care-givers indicated some significant and

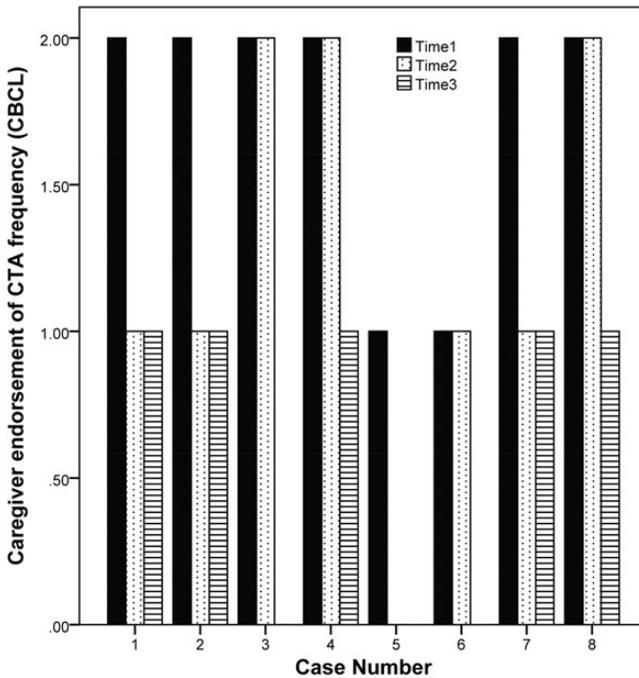


Figure 1 Parental rating of the 'cruel to animals' item from CBCL across Times 1, 2 and 3.

important changes in the way the children were relating to the animals within their families. For example, one care-giver described changes that she attributed to the PH programme as 'He has displayed kindness and empathy towards our animals and has started to talk better to his younger brother' and 'He now cuddles our dog instead of hitting and hurting her'. Both quotes highlight important improvements not only for the humans, but also for the animals within these families.

Limitations of the study

The evaluation of the AAT programme shows mixed results. There is evidence of a statistically and clinically significant decrease in care-giver-reported CTA, across the cohort of children. Our small sample size necessitates tentative conclusions about the gender-based effect, namely that girls' CTA might be more amenable to programmes such as the one described above. A significant reduction in the children who were touching animals sexually was not evident except in the case of two boys who concurrently displayed high levels of other forms of CTA. Again, our small subsample makes it difficult to draw solid conclusions about the programme's ability to reduce children's sexual touching of animals but does suggest that this is an area worthy of further study.

From a methodological point of view, there is an obvious and acknowledged flaw with relying on single items within measures to record the presence/absence of cruelty/sexualised touching of animals (e.g. Dadds *et al.*, 2004). Future research that aims to investigate the benefits of AATs to animals as well as humans might use a more definitive measure such as the Cruelty to Animals Inventory (Dadds *et al.*, 2004). This would avoid some of the definitional problems our measures carried, such as lack of consistency regarding care-giver definitions of acceptable versus cruel treatment of animals.

Our study did not measure the long-term impacts of the PH programme on the participants or companion animals in their environs. Future research might aim to ascertain efficacy over time. Also, while a great deal of care and attention was paid to the animals in the study, we did not attempt to measure or qualify their experiences in the PH programme. Future research might consider doing so, as there is an urgent need to determine what impacts there are on animals used in therapeutic interventions.

Wider ethical implications of the Phoenix House programme

Any 'use' of animals may send the message that they are willing tools to be used to benefit humans. The PH programme attempted to remedy this by attending to both animal and human needs, showing that the two sets of interests can co-exist in programme design and implementation. From a social work perspective, there are many benefits of AATs that include HEPs. By increasing children's empathy for companion animals, future animals may be protected from potential harm and the children's own quality of life might also be strengthened by opening up the opportunities to connect with animals. After all, there is ample evidence to show that caring for animals can lower human blood pressure, slow down our heart rates and emotionally soothe us. Often helping us laugh, animals can engage us in the kind of spontaneous play we are less likely to display to other humans. This applies equally to adults but especially for children subjected to cruelty and neglect, who may find companion animals easier to talk to than doctors and therapists (Geist, 2011; Karol, 2007).

PH is only one of many possible programmes relevant to animal-assisted or VSW. Their ethical legitimacy rests not just on the benefits derived to humans, but whether due consideration is given to the animals' needs, not just in the short term while the programme occurs, but in the longer term, for the full duration of the animals' lives.

Sufficient care, pre-planning and resources are needed to ethically engage the services of animals in social work activities. Well-meaning but misdirected actions may involve any type of animal and any cohort of people.

Naïve actions, such as giving rabbits/guinea pigs to young children already known to be cruel to animals, and simply hoping no harm comes to the animals, are not acceptable. Similarly problematic would be for social workers to help clients adopt cats or dogs without helping them think through the longer-term implications, or failing to support clients' care for their animals, post-adoption.

Costs and risks are part of the care of both people and animals. Careful assessments need to be made to match animals needs and tendencies with clients and their contexts (also see [Menzies Inc., 2003](#)). Careful thought needs to be given when pairing rescue dogs with socially disadvantaged and/or traumatised clients. Appreciation must be given to the possibility that rescue animals may—or may not—be suitable to the rigours much assisted-therapy work requires. Like those they may be expected to serve, these animals may also display emotional or behavioural problems from past maltreatment. Evaluations of the efficacy of animal-assisted programmes must consider these issues as well as those relating to the people in the programmes.

Enthusiasm for the benefits animals can bring to clients' lives needs to be tempered with sensible and sensitive concerns for the well-being of partner animals. Knowledge about the species and the individual animals involved in programmes is essential. Good intentions but insufficient skills and expertise in animal handling will not suffice. In the PH project, officers from the RSPCA ensured these responsibilities were met. Trained in handling the animals, these officers had the expertise to safely enable the children to have the chance to experience the pleasures of animal contact but not at the expense of the animals themselves. The challenge is for other professionals such as social workers, community workers, youth workers and psychologists to 'remember' to honour these requirements and contracting the help of trained animal handlers may be necessary. We need to remember that the long-standing division between humans and animals, and tendency for humans to assume automatic superiority, makes it easier to lose sight of the animals' needs.

Summary

This paper explores social work's historical exclusion of non-human animals and the ethics of continuing to do so given the rise in AATs. Rather than advocating for the abolition of all AATs, we have argued for more explicit ethical stances to be articulated starting with the recognition of animals in social work codes of ethics. Animals may be used legitimately to advance humans' therapeutic needs but we caution against the vast proliferation of AATs driven solely by human concerns. We have used the PH programme to illustrate how the needs of humans and animals may be promoted. Our analysis of the data collected through this AAT programme suggests that some promising behaviour and attitudinal changes can result from interventions

designed to increase children's empathy for animals, which in turn we hope will help reduce the risk of future acts of animal cruelty.

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