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The Consideration of Animals Within Australian Social Work Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

There is growing impetus for social work to move beyond a human-centric social justice orientation to include the consideration of animals. Social work programs in Australia are currently not required to include content related to animals within the curricula and little is known about the extent to which this content is currently being taught in Australia. The aim of this study was to explore how consideration of human–animal relations has been incorporated into Australian social work programs. Fifteen social work educators were surveyed with three of these participants also undertaking semistructured interviews. The findings revealed that where animal-related content was included it predominantly took an "instrumental" or "anthropocentric" focus related solely to human wellbeing. Exceptions to this focus were found to exist within some ethics and theory units under topics such as "green social work". Participants report barriers to including such content citing factors related to challenges within the university context and the perceived relative importance of other topics within a crowded social work curriculum. Despite an upsurge in interest in animal-related content reflected in the literature and a broader shift in societal attitudes towards animals, the findings of this small study indicate that Australian social work curriculum currently does not reflect this increasing interest.

IMPLICATIONS

- As a social justice–oriented profession social work has an ethical responsibility to expand its focus to include consideration of human–animal relations within the Australian social work curriculum.
- There is evidence that inclusion of content related to animals is limited and is often a reflection of the educator's commitment and passion for the topic rather than curriculum priorities or requirements.
- Further research is needed to gain a better understanding of the extent to which human–animal relations content is included within Australian social work curriculum and what barriers may exist to its inclusion.

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Social work is a social justice–oriented profession which aims to improve the wellbeing of vulnerable populations by challenging systemic marginalisation and oppression (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2017). The animal rights movement is concerned with liberating nonhuman animals from practices of oppression and promoting equal ethical consideration for the rights of all living beings (Zalta, 2017). Contemporary literature from a range of disciplines, including social work, argue that the liberation of nonhuman animals is a social justice issue that intersects with other social justice movements (Boisseau, 2019; Nibert, 2014; Nocella II et al., 2014). Notwithstanding, the Australian social work profession has, until very recently, made little acknowledgement of nonhuman animals within the profession's values or Code of Ethics (AASW, 2020c; 2010) and remains largely a "human rights"-based profession (Hanrahan, 2014). The recently revised *AASW Code of Ethics* has included, for the first time, reference to animals in section 4.2 under "commitment to social justice and human rights" where it states that social workers are required to "ensure that any animal engaged as part of social work is protected" (AASW, 2020c, p. 13). The Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers [ANZASW] (2019) Code of Ethics was updated to include reference to animals for the first time, extending manaakitanga (respect, generosity and care) towards animals with the following statement: "We recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected" (ANZASW, 2019, p. 11). Sentience describes the ability to feel pain and other sensations such as pleasure (Ryder, 2011). New Zealand's inclusion of sentience in the Code of Ethics may suggest greater accountability towards some animals for social workers practising within the ANZASW. Despite such moves and a growing call from scholar-activists interested in green and critical social work for the profession to expand its understanding of social justice to incorporate the nonhuman world including animals, progress remains slow (Gray & Coates, 2012; Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014; Morley et al., 2019; Wolf, 2000).

It has been argued that sociocultural attitudes towards animals remain a barrier to integrating the consideration of animals into social work (Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). Dominant western culture adopts an anthropocentric view towards animals, with societal attitudes, beliefs, norms, and expectations aligning primarily with speciesism (Crist & Kopnina, 2014), defined as "discrimination on the basis of species" (Ryder, 2011, p. 157). Speciesism results in the oppression, exploitation, and exclusion of nonhuman animals from compassion and empathy, particularly in moral and ethical debates (Sorenson, 2020). Various western cultural practices and theories support this view of animals, including dominant Judaeo-Christian beliefs (Simkins, 2014; White, 1967), social dominance theory (Dhont et al., 2016; Jackson, 2019; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), and utilitarianism (Hsiao, 2015; Matheny, 2006). Despite this view, we have witnessed a rise in veganism, animal rights, and environmental concerns related to animal agriculture (Budgar, 2017; Janssen et al., 2016). This increased awareness coupled with social work's alignment with social justice has seen a growing interest in human–animal relations within social work (Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013; Ryan, 2014; Walker et al., 2015). Social work theoretical approaches such as antioppressive theory, feminist theory, and ecological theory provide a strong justification and rationale for including the consideration of animals. Many feminist theorists, for instance, have highlighted the links between the oppression of women and that of

animals (Adams, 1990/2010; Adams & Donovan, 1995; Curtin, 1991; Twine, 2010; Wyckoff, 2014). Elsewhere the evolution of ecological theory has seen practitioners and scholars alike argue for expanding ecological assessments to include the consideration of human–animal relationships (Bretzlaff-Holstein, 2018; Hanrahan, 2014; Walker et al., 2015). Research also has identified links between animal abuse and human abuse, such as domestic and family violence, showing increasing promise and insight into both prevention and intervention strategies in this space (Ascione & Shapiro, 2009; Macias-Mayo, 2018; Taylor & Fraser, 2019). Antioppressive practice has been highlighted as an approach that implores social workers to consider interwoven oppressions, including the abuse of animals and humans in various settings such as those employed in meat processing (Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2013). At the same time, the vital relational, support and health-enhancing role that animals often play in the lives of human beings is being recognised and is reflected in the rise in interest in animal-assisted therapy and related interventions (Cheung & Kwong Kam, 2018; Sable, 2013; Walsh, 2009).

Accreditation for social work training in Australia occurs through the AASW (2020b). All accredited training is offered at the tertiary education level, delivered through Bachelor of Social Work and Master of Social Work courses in Australia (AASW, 2020a). According to the Australian Social Work Education and Accreditation Standards [ASWEAS], Australian social work courses are required to cover five core curriculum areas: construction of social work purpose, place, and practice; power, oppression, and exploitation; the history and contribution of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; culture, identity, and discrimination; and psychosocial and wellbeing across the life cycle (AASW, 2020b, p. 8). While it is possible that content taught within these five core curriculum areas covers human–animal relations, this is largely unknown and thus far no studies were found that examined this issue. It is therefore difficult to ascertain the degree to which social work curriculum in Australia reflects the shifts evident in this space.

The aim of this study was to explore how the consideration of human–animal relations has been incorporated into social work teaching and curriculum from the perspective of educators within accredited social work programes in Australia.

Method

Research Framework and Design

The theoretical framework for this study comprised insights from constructionist epistemology and the field of critical animal studies (CAS). The two approaches were chosen as most appropriate given the influence of sociocultural discourses in the framing and perception of nonhuman animals within society and the influence this has had upon social work's engagement with animals.

Constructionist epistemology proposes that individuals and societies make meaning through their social interactions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). These exchanges generate knowledge, which both individuals and collectives embrace as their truth (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Constructionist theorists argue knowledge is dynamic and ever-changing rather than fixed and determined (Karnilowicz et al., 2014). The focus for

constructionists is to understand the socio-cultural contexts and structures that impact individual experiences in contrast to individual motivations or psychologies (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mallon, 2016). Critical animal studies (CAS) is an interdisciplinary field that explores animal oppression and exploitation through an academic and political lens. CAS advocates for the liberation of animals from oppression and the abolition of ecological exploitation (Socha & Mitchell, 2014). CAS embodies the overlap of core values and beliefs of critical social work but extends consideration to nonhuman animals and the environment. Academics drawing on CAS believe the history of human and animal oppression is intersectional and deeply entwined and therefore requires collaboration by social justice movements to dismantle power structures that maintain this oppression (Nibert, 2014; Nocella & J, 2019). CAS provides a critical framework to understand the sociopolitical and academic contexts that produce and reinforce the exploitation and oppression of nonhuman animals, making it an appropriate theoretical lens for the present study.

The study took a mixed-methods exploratory approach to answering the research question "How has the consideration of human–animal relations been incorporated into social work teaching and curriculum?" It consisted of a self-administered survey and semistructured interviews.

Participants

The study employed a purposive sampling approach and called for participants who met the inclusion criteria of being a current educator within an accredited social work program in Australia. Tertiary providers and programs appropriate for the survey were identified through the AASW (2020a) website of accredited social work programs, and recruitment to the study was via email contact with the heads of the discipline (or equivalent) within each program. The survey was sent to a total of 33 universities in September 2020 and was open for 6 weeks. A total of 15 social work educators within Australian tertiary programs completed the survey. Survey respondents were given the opportunity to express their interest in completing a semistructured interview, with 3 participants completing interviews.

Procedure

Data for the study were gathered in two phases. The first phase collected data through a self-administered survey, while the second phase gathered data through semistructured interviews. The self-administered survey was offered online via the LimeSurvey software tool. The survey utilised a combination of Likert scale responses and free text comments in response to 11 questions aimed at gathering data on various aspects of the respondents' knowledge and views on the teaching of material related to animals within social work programs in Australia. It should be noted here that, despite its limitations, the authors chose to use the term "animals" within the survey rather than "nonhuman animals" or other critically informed terminology, as this term was more likely to be readily understood by the respondents.

The second phase of the study involved semistructured interviews with 3 of the survey respondents. An interview schedule consisting of 7 loosely structured questions was

devised drawing upon preliminary findings of the survey and the literature review. The interviews also provided an opportunity to garner participants' responses to the recent updating of the *AASW Code of Ethics* (2020c) to include a reference to animals in social work, something that had occurred during the administering of the survey. The interviews, lasting approximately 30 min each were conducted online via Microsoft Teams from December 2021—January 2022. Each interview was transcribed, de-identified, and collated. All 3 interview participants came from the same university: one being a field education co-ordinator, another a lecturer, and the final interviewee being a senior lecturer and program director.

Data Analysis

Data were analysed using a thematic analysis approach as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The method of initial coding for the raw data employed a value coding process whereby values, attitudes or beliefs which represent underlying perspectives or world views are identified (Miles et al., 2014). Codes then were examined for overarching themes utilising a theoretical analysis approach informed by the insights of constructionist epistemology and critical animal studies. After the first round of preliminary coding and theme generation, the questions and corresponding data were placed into a table for a second round of coding. The codes were crosschecked with preliminary findings to determine the robustness of fit or to identify new emerging patterns. Finally, the themes were discussed and reviewed within the research term for coherence and consistency. An interpretivist approach was employed in this study whereby the researchers foregrounded and acknowledged their world views and pre-existing value and theoretical orientations. Regular meetings between all members of the research team allowed for a robust examination of unexpected or contradictory findings and early theorising of possible explanations. The study was undertaken as part of the second author's social work master's dissertation with ethics clearance gained through the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (GU Ref No: 2020/612).

Findings

Survey Findings

Six of the 15 respondents indicated that the social work program they currently teach within included content that considered animals. None of the respondents indicated that they offered a course focused *solely* on animals in social work. The following topic areas or fields of practice were identified as featuring this content: mental health, disasters, domestic and family violence, social work ethics, animal-assisted interventions, companion animal relationships, and extending beyond a "human rights" focus to include animals and nature. Domestic violence and mental health were the most-referred-to areas within which animal content would be incorporated.

Respondents were asked to consider the five core curriculum areas outlined by the ASWEAS and respond to the question "Should content relating to animals be included within social work programs?" They also were asked to comment on the reasons for their response. The survey results revealed that most respondents (12 out of the 15) voiced

support for social work education to include animal-related content. However, the comments indicated divergent perspectives on where would be the most appropriate place for this content within the social work curriculum. As commented by one respondent:

> Not as a core course or a core focus; however, it should be part of critical discussions in terms of how it relates to ethics, critical social work, the wellbeing of the planet, and, of course, the wellbeing of people, e.g., companion animals, pets in nursing homes, Indigenous ways of knowing, etc … (respondent 3)

A small number of respondents questioned whether inclusion of such content was justified citing an already "crowded" or "overburdened" curriculum: "My uncertainty relates to the competition for content to be included in the social work curriculum and the relative importance of this topic to other possible topics that are currently also absent … " (respondent 8). Of those who supported the inclusion of such content most tended to provide an anthropocentric rationale, that is, one based upon the needs of humans. As described here by one respondent:

> Animals play an important part in humans' lives, so there are many areas in the curriculum where it would be relevant to teach about animals … However, it does not seem useful to teach about animals in a more general sense or to get into debates about the rights of animals as this is not relevant to social work, which relates to human wellbeing and society. (respondent 13)

Animal-assisted interventions (AAI) were referred to in the literature as an increasingly popular social work intervention and this was reflected in the responses to the survey with the majority (12 respondents) indicating that AAI should be incorporated into social work curriculum either as core content or as an elective. Similarly, when exploring the topic of including animals within ecological assessment, most participants agreed or strongly agreed with the following statement "I believe it is important to discuss animal relationships with my clients while completing ecological assessments".

The survey questions prompted respondents to identify if they had included content-related to animals in their courses. Seven of the 15 respondents indicated that they had made a conscious effort to include such content. Respondents were provided with the option of describing how the inclusion of this content was achieved. Examples included exploring companion animals and human wellbeing, trauma recovery, ethics and theory, and examining the treatment of animals within social justice discussions:

> I use the example of how "normal" attitudes to women, slavery, disability, homosexuality, etc. 50 years ago are now abhorrent … I discuss how the "normal" attitude we have today to the treatment of animals (in particular the factory farming industry) will be considered similarly abhorrent in 50 years' time. (respondent 8)

> I teach ethics subjects and have written course content for both the undergraduate and post-graduate ethics courses that include a focus on nonhuman animal ethics. I focus on the morality of eating animals, veganism and explore a future where social work might extend its concept of "human rights" to explore rights for the environment and nonhuman animals. (respondent 2)

The researchers sought to explore the views of respondents on animal welfare and animal rights. The distinction between the two concepts was deemed important as an animal *welfare* approach aligns with anthropocentric approaches whereas an animal *rights*

perspective specifically challenges the "human first" anthropocentrism that is commonplace within social work (Ryan, 2014). An equal number of participants (7 in total) indicated support for animal rights *and* animal welfare approaches and sought to incorporate related content into their teaching. In responding to the question about animal rights, however, a number of the respondents indicated a desire to explore the application and validity of the concept of "animal rights":

> An entity can only be considered to have a "right" if it is capable of asserting that right … I am concerned about the welfare of animals. However, I would not teach students to frame concern for animals within a "rights" framework. (respondent 13)

Another respondent made the following comment noting personal and professional tensions relating to an animal-rights perspective:

> The current curriculum does not provide the scope, and so I have a private identity in which animal rights and relationships is important and a professional identity in which it is undervalued. It is not discussed in the curriculum, but also it is not discussed in the staff space either—is there pet bereavement leave? I wouldn't know. (respondent 9)

Finally, one respondent argued strongly against the inclusion of such content suggesting that to do so would be damaging for social work:

> Social work should aim to consolidate and promote its position as a key human service, as worthy of respect and funding as psychology, nursing, speech pathology, etc., rather than further undermining this position with forays into niche issues like animal rights. (respondent 13)

Respondents were asked their views on the possible inclusion of animals within the *AASW Code of Ethics*. As noted earlier, the survey was open during the period directly before the launch of the revised *AASW Code of Ethics* in November 2020 which includes the first-ever reference to animals. Survey respondents were provided with the statement regarding animals contained in the *Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics* (2019, p. 11) which reads "we recognise the sentience of animals and ensure that any animal engaged as part of our social work practice is protected". They were then asked to indicate if they supported a similar change to the *AASW Code of Ethics*. The overwhelming majority (14 of the 15 respondents) supported such a move. When asked to expand on the reasons for this answer, comments reflected a diversity of viewpoints ranging from predominantly anthropocentric approaches to those informed by a broader focus on social justice, and environmental and animal rights imperatives. As one participant argued:

> It should for a range of reasons: Interconnectedness to life and all species. Indigenous ways of doing and being needs to be the way of the future for the profession. No longer can social work maintain such [a] human-centric and egotistical position to changes across all the systems. As professionals, we need to be able to understand and work within green spaces as a result of climate injustice and to understand and broaden out our way of understanding the human—all other species interconnectedness. (respondent 11)

The one respondent who was not in support asserted the following:

> The AASW has a legitimate role in creating and regulating professional ethics. However, it has no legitimate claim to be the arbiter of morality more generally. It is possible to be a good human services practitioner while holding a diversity of views about animals. (respondent 13)

Interviews

Three survey respondents opted to participate in an interview. Three key themes were elicited from the interview data and are discussed below.

Social Justice and Animals

Interviewees were asked for their views on social justice and how this relates to animals. Interviewees expressed different viewpoints in relation to this question with one emphasising an "all inclusive" notion of social justice as it relates to social work stating "I see social justice and equality and all those foundational values of social work to apply to all species. So, I wouldn't delineate between human or nonhuman or the environment" (interviewee 2, lecturer). Another observed the following: "The way we treat animals is not that much different to the way we treat humans. We treat humans dreadfully. We seem capable of treating other human beings appallingly. The way we treat animals is part of that continuum … " (interviewee 3, senior lecturer/program director). Two interviewees argued for an animal welfare and anthropocentric understanding of social justice with both asserting that while animals do not deserve "equal" consideration, their welfare should be protected with sufficient resources and legislation. There was concern expressed that we do not currently have sufficient protections in place.

Culture and Context of Social Work Education

A significant theme elicited from the interviews focused on animals within the university social work context. One interviewee described experiencing defensiveness from colleagues while discussing their personal and professional views on the topic of animal rights:

> And with colleagues, I have had discussions. People are quite defensive, and I am not an argumentative type [of] person. I don't think conflict leads to change really, particularly in this area. So, I have always been happy to talk about my views, but not really interested in challenging others, trying more to lead by example. (interviewee 2, lecturer)

The other two interviewees indicated that the topic of animal rights was not often explored in the work setting but that conversations focusing on animal welfare did occur: " … so, what you're talking about is the care of the animal, but still, we as humans have some kind of dominion over the animals. So, it's definitely around [an] animal welfare perspective rather than animal rights" (interviewee 1, field educator). One of the interviewees commented on the seemingly binary approach invoked by the concept of animal "rights" and argued for a more nuanced approach to be taken within social work stating:

> I don't think social work calls us to have an equal concern for the rights of animals and the welfare of animals as it does for humans … To me, it's not a simple binary … I think that social work should be concerned about protecting the environment, should be concerned about creating a sustainable world … A sustainable world includes the natural environment, and living in harmony with animals, and living beings, and other aspects of the natural environment … (interviewee 3, senior lecturer/program director)

In the survey, some noted that social work programs are overburdened by competing curriculum priorities. The interviewees were asked to consider this notion and asked to reflect on how this may impact the inclusion of new content. Two of the interviewees expressed the belief that the curriculum needs to prioritise what is essential for students to learn and were of the view that the consideration of animals was not one of these areas and therefore should not be included over other competing demands such as an increased focus on trauma and mental health. The other interviewee, while acknowledging this constraint, took a different view making the following observation:

> So, this is a big one really, because we're quite full in terms of what we have to teach already to meet accreditation demands. So, the question then is "how do we incorporate this?" But I think, I think that's a bit short-sighted really because we've always kept up with the latest topics. Like we brought in discussions of environmentalism, probably ten years ago, into our course curriculum, and it fits quite nicely in, and now it's embedded in a whole bunch of our courses. (interviewee 2, lecturer)

The interviews further explored how the current university environment or context impacts the ability to teach new content about animals within social work. Interview participants identified various factors including the influence of key decision makers within the university hierarchy, the current university environment due to the impact of COVID-19 and the subjective nature of what might come to be prioritised within the curriculum. On this last point interviewees felt this to be both a strength and a barrier allowing for flexibility in the content and delivery of courses but also sometimes relying too much on individual preference or interest. The perceived economic impact of COVID-19 upon the increasingly "budget minded" approach to university education also was noted by one of the interviewees who stated that "my understanding of the way things are going at the moment, no university is going to open up to up to a bunch of new subjects at the moment because of COVID-19 and budgets … " (interviewee 2, lecturer).

Translating Values and Ethics to Practice

Participants were asked their thoughts on the change to include a reference to animals within the *AASW Code of Ethics*. All interviewees expressed support for the inclusion of animals in the newly revised Code of Ethics with one expressing the view that the move does not go far enough, arguing for a more critical view of human rights to encompass the natural environment. Two of the interviewees felt that while this move was laudable the practical application of this content remained unclear and posed a challenge for the profession. It was noted that the AASW has provided "no guidance about how you might practically apply this" (interviewee 1, field educator).

Discussion

The findings of this study show that while many of the participants demonstrated an interest or desire to include the consideration of animals into social work curriculum, there are areas of debate as to its relative importance to the profession and barriers to the inclusion of such content.

Respondents differed on their views as to whether the concept of "social justice" should extend to include animals and similarly expressed differing opinions on the possibility of "decentring" human rights within the social work profession. For some this was seen as a necessary and positive step reflective of the value base of social work and the need to respond to urgent and contemporary issues such as environmental issues. Others expressed a reluctance to move further in this direction, concerned that this shift may somehow diminish the professional standing of social work or detract from other more "necessary" and important areas of focus.

We found that support for the inclusion of animals within social work was mainly informed by an anthropocentric lens reflecting dominant sociocultural norms as identified in the literature (Hanrahan, 2014; Matsuoka & Sorenson, 2014). Interventions or modalities such as animal-assisted therapies (AAI) enjoyed strong support as did increasing the awareness of animals in the domestic and family violence context. Once again, this aligns with what we found in recent literature (Taylor & Fraser, 2019). On the topic of expanding the social justice lens of social work to include animals, the majority of participants preferred an anthropocentric "animal welfare" approach be taken when considering animals in social work. The findings suggest that the reasons for this preference lay in the belief that animals remain "lesser" moral beings and as such do not "deserve" equal consideration to humans. Despite this, societal shifts in attitudes towards animals were found to be reflected in this study as evidenced by comments made by interviewee 3 on the "continuum" of harm impacting humans and animals.

Future research is needed into how social work educators' beliefs and attitudes in this area inform social work curriculum and practice changes.

Limitations

It must be noted that this study was limited to a small number of participants and the sample was purposive and self-selected and therefore its findings cannot be generalised. The interview participants were all from the same university, so the interview findings may be a reflection of factors related to the individual institution. The survey was distributed during the early stages of the COVID-19 global pandemic. This was a time of significant disruption for the university sector and it is speculated this may have reduced the number of participants.

Conclusion

The aim of this exploratory study was to investigate how the consideration of animals is being incorporated into social work curriculum in Australia from the perspective of social work educators. Findings from this small study suggest that while content related to human-animal relations is viewed as important and relevant to social work, challenges exist around its inclusion into university curriculum. The reasons for these challenges are multiple and range from factors related to the university context, uncertainty about the relevance of the topic, lack of knowledge regarding how to incorporate such content, and hesitation on the part of those wishing to take on such topics, fearing criticism. Findings in this study may indicate that some social work education programs may *reflect* rather than challenge dominant beliefs about human-animal relations. This is

notable as the social work profession has often been a leader in advancing social justice causes. As this was a small study it may be beneficial to undertake further studies to explore in more detail social work educators' attitudes and experiences to better understand the unique barriers to including such content in social work education in Australia.

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