When Ida Came To Class: The Inclusion of Animals in the Social Work Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

The inclusion of animals within social work education is a relatively new, and still rare, component of curriculum development in Australia and New Zealand. To remedy this omission within our final-year social work programmes at The University of Auckland, New Zealand, the authors designed a lecture with two main focal points and with two underpinning agendas. This article summarises the knowledge base and conceptual underpinning of the presentation, which addresses an animal-inclusive consideration of human service organisations in the disaster context and the relationship between domestic/intimate partner violence and animals. Accounts of the active participation of a companion animal within the lecture serve to portray attachment bonds and provide a basic introduction to human–animal interaction. Social work's potential for activism in the field of animal as well as human rights is included, with a call for a re-conceptualisation of a systems-based ecological perspective for human services and social work practice.

Keywords: *Social work; Social work education; Curriculum; Animals; Disaster; Domestic violence,*

INTRODUCTION

The inclusion of animals within social work education is a relatively new, and still rare, component of curriculum development in Australia and New Zealand. While focused, specialist post-graduate programmes exist within North America (e.g., the University of Tennessee) and a more general masters course has just commenced in New Zealand (at the University of Otago), little emphasis is placed within generic qualifying programmes on the knowledge, values and skills development required of an animal-inclusive approach to social work practice. To address this gap within the two qualifying programmes in social work at the University of Auckland (one at undergraduate and one at postgraduate level), the authors designed a lecture with two main focal points and two underpinning agendas. This article summarises both the knowledge base and the conceptual underpinning of the lecture, and describes the focal points of: a) the practice and responsibilities of human services organisations in relation to the needs of companion animals in a disaster context; and b) the relationship between domestic/intimate partner violence and animals. The contribution of the third author, Ida Adamson, is described in relation to the portrayal of attachment bonds and a basic introduction to human–animal interaction. In addition, an acknowledgement of social work's potential for activism in the field of animal, as well as human, rights is included, with a call for a re-conceptualisation of a systems-based ecological perspective for human services and social work practice.

The genesis of the theoretical work for this paper arose from the first author's interest in the challenge of embedding a disaster-informed curriculum within generic social work education (Adamson, 2014). The rationale for embedding curriculum content in qualifying courses rather than creating postgraduate specialist courses is a pragmatic, population-based argument: whilst social work is recognised in the IFSW definition (IFSW, 2014) as an academic discipline, the purpose of the vast proportion of social work programmes remains with the pre-qualifying level, geared towards the production of a professional social work workforce. Such a population-based delivery allows for a broader, but less intensive, coverage of content and requires social work education to consider the linkage of any new content with extant concepts and skills in the curriculum. The focal point for the development of curriculum content thus becomes the insertion/embedding and/or infiltration of new material or fresh perspectives into existing – and it can be argued, already overcrowded – curricula. In relationship to a disaster-informed curriculum, Adamson (2014) argued that curriculum can be embedded in a range of teaching and learning opportunities, including values, skills and theory, research and practicum opportunities (for instance, Breckenridge & James, 2010; DePrince, Priebe, & Newton, 2011).

As an academic whose first language was Labrador, the first author's parallel interest in animals, their welfare and rights, was translated into a summer scholarship (completed by John Darroch) which focused on the needs of companion animals in a disaster context. (For this purpose, the term *companion animal* is chosen over *pet*, as an indication of the relational importance of domesticated animals living alongside people within the human home: farmed animals and those living in undomesticated settings, either free-roaming or in some form of captivity, were not in the purview of the research nor that of this

lecture and article.) The outcome of the scholarship was a literature review and a practical scoping of human services organisations' (HSOs') awareness of the inclusion of animals within disaster response in Aotearoa New Zealand. The second author brought a long-term commitment to animal rights activism to this scholarship. A substantive by-product of the disaster focus within the summer scholarship was the emergence of interest in, and the acquisition of, literature regarding the relationship of companion animals to domestic and intimate partner violence. It was thus a logical extension to take up the challenge of inserting animal-inclusive content into the social work curriculum. As a result of these twin pursuits, subsequent conference presentations and an article focusing on the responsibilities of HSOs for animal-inclusive disaster planning and response (Darroch & Adamson, in press), a lecture presentation serving the needs of final-year social work students was developed within a 'best practice' course that combined the two qualifying programmes at the university in one delivery.

The prime focus of this final-year course is that of best practice interventions in social work. Using a critical pedagogy that aims to deconstruct notions of evidence based practice and to enable students to re/construct their own working, integrated understanding of best practice (Jones, Cooper, & Ferguson, 2008), the course is designed to create opportunities for students on the cusp of beginning practice to weave together the theoretical influences underpinning social work with their own values and a socio-political analysis of real world practice. Prior to the 'Animals and social work' lecture, exposure to conceptual and practice challenges had taken the form of (for example) discussion about child and family social work in the light of current, politically driven reviews of child protection service delivery (Hyslop, 2016), critical consideration of notions of trauma-informed practice (Harris & Fallot, 2001), and learning from family violence death reviews (Wilson, Smith, Tolmie, & De Haan, 2015). Disaster content had been signalled within a lecture on crisis intervention. In all of the two-hour lectures, the overriding aim was to establish a critical analysis of current approaches to best practice and, within this, for students to build their own emergent sense of the integration of theory to practice. Central to the purpose of the course is the combination and recombination of elements of practice with which students are already familiar with an element of the new: a new perspective, a challenge to established assumptions underpinning practice, or a personal challenge to embed their own values and experience into practice realities.

Introducing the relationship between animals and social work was therefore an opportunity to highlight what is an under-explored element of human experience within social work education – that of the human-animal bond and its implications for social work intervention. For the lecture, we chose a twin curriculum focus of animal-inclusive practice in a disaster context, presenting first an adapted version of a conference presentation that, with a disaster risk reduction (DRR) frame, focused upon the roles and responsibilities of human service workers in relation to service users and their companion animals. Students had previously been introduced to crisis and disaster content within this course. The relationship of this content to the second topic of animals and domestic violence was enabled through the highlighting of risk factors for animal cruelty, such as familial stressors, and an exploration of the dynamics of violence and abuse in which both humans and animals become embroiled. Delivery of this content was achieved through conventional PowerPoint delivery and class discussion, with presenters alternating contributions. Students completed a reading and

lecture log to capture reflections that served to integrate and develop their current understanding of best practice approaches in social work. What marked the presentation as unique was the presence and active participation by the third author, Ida, a three-year-old Labrador dog. Ida's commentary, translated by the first author, is presented within this article in italics.

Human service organisations and animal-inclusive practice in the disaster context

The focus of this component of the teaching was on providing a rationale for human services workers to be animal-aware in their DRR practice, both in the planning for disasters and being adequately prepared to respond to both humans and their companion animals. In addition, given the students' position on the cusp of beginning practice, we wished to introduce some practical measures that individual practitioners and organisations could incorporate into practice.

Social work practice has, to date, under-emphasised or ignored animals, either in their relationship with humans or as sentient beings with rights (Ryan, 2011; Walker, Aimers, & Perry, 2015). Internationally there has been increasing recognition that the welfare of companion animals is something which must be taken into account in DRR, either for their own welfare or because of their influence on human responses (Appleby & Stokes, 2008). Evidence suggests that companion animals are a powerful determinant of human behaviour during disasters, Hunt, Bogue, and Rohrbaugh (2012) evidencing that failure to evacuate during disaster is strongly related to the presence of companion animals in the home. The wellbeing of animals has a significant effect on people's ability to recover from disasters, with compounding impacts of grief and loss, increased isolation and mental health consequences being noted after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Zottarelli, 2010). Nevertheless, and this was an argument we wanted to put to the class, there is still a very real philosophical and practical divide between organisations which are focused on the wellbeing of humans and those devoted to the protection and care of animals. When viewed through two complementary theoretical lenses, the distinction between humans and animals is counterproductive to effective human services and social work practice within both disaster and domestic violence contexts.

The theoretical lenses offered to the class within this lecture were those of deep ecology (Besthorn, 2013) and of attachment theory. Other knowledge bases and lenses are equally pertinent: students were already familiar, through the IFSW definition of social work (IFSW, 2014) and their social work, policy and community development courses, of the human rights imperatives laid out by scholars such as Ife (2001) and O'Brien (2009). It can equally be suggested that green social work and consideration of sustainability be utilised as a fundamental theoretical underpinning (for instance, Dominelli, 2012; Gray, Coates, & Hetherington, 2013) and this was acknowledged whilst using principles of deep ecology to stimulate thinking about the human relationship with the rest of the natural world. Whilst social work's attention to ecological issues is likely to shape future curriculum development (Jones, 2010), we worked with the assumption that concepts of deep ecology are less familiar to the majority of the student group, and its principles were briefly defined as re-ordering the assumptive relationship between human beings and the natural world so that human beings are recognised as part of an inter-dependent eco-system rather than as its focal point. Deep ecology was introduced as a contestable knowledge

base which has growing relevance in relationship to other focal points for practice, such as the impact of climate change and sustainability debates. We suggested to the class that, rather than a 'person-in-environment' systems perspective very familiar to them through human development and social work theory and practice curricula, that an 'environment-including-people' approach is best suited for ecologically complex investigations (e.g., Taylor, 2013), and argued that this description fits disaster planning for HSOs.

The second, and potentially more familiar and accessible, knowledge base for the session was that of attachment theory. We asked for a show of hands for those in the class who lived with companion animals: this approximated the Aotearoa New Zealand estimation of 52% living with a cat, and 30% sharing their home with a dog (http://www.teara.govt.nz) and confirmed Glassey's finding that people view animals as part of the family (2010). We used this practical illustration of relationship as an underpinning for an overview of the impact of disasters on the human–animal bond. Whilst companion animals have become integral parts of family life, the acceptance of the needs of animals within families may be particularly difficult to achieve when planning for, and responding to, disasters, given that resources are limited and even ensuring human wellbeing may not always be possible (Glassey, 2010; Trigg, Thompson, Smith, & Bennett, 2016). We suggested that an anthropocentric lens held by human services and disaster response organisations can perpetuate this lack of responsivity (e.g., Irvine, 2006).

Human attachment to companion animals was illustrated within a disaster context. With reference to the negative impact of disasters, the potential for trauma resulting from separation from animals was illustrated by slides showing the appeals painted on house walls to save animals during the catastrophe of Hurricane Katrina in 2005 (Awadi, Hunt, & Johnson, 2008). Risks to those attempting to rescue animals in disasters highlighted the strong attachment relationship (Irvine, 2006; Westcott, 2015). The positive impact of the human–animal bond was determined through discussion of the possibility for enhanced resilience, with animals providing provide a range of physiological and psychological benefits to individuals post-disaster (Hart, 2010; Wells, 2009) as well as evidence that animals can encourage people to prepare for disasters by providing an 'other' focus for disaster planning (Thompson et al., 2014). Acknowledgement of the positive benefits of animals for stress reduction and management was briefly made, and links provided in the lecture material to research that supported this from fields outside of disaster contexts (for instance, brief mention of the physiological calming effect of animal contact was made, as exemplified in Nagasawa et al., 2015). Overall, the rationale for including animals was established by referring to the significant costs of failing to plan for the wellbeing of animals during disasters (Glassey, 2014), and – significantly for social work's attention to human rights and social justice concerns – the risks for those with poor support networks who are disproportionately impacted by the loss of a companion animal in a disaster (Antonacopoulos & Pychyl, 2010; Lowe, Rhodes, Zwiebach, & Chan, 2009).

Ida's commentary:
Whilst Carole and John were delivering the theoretical rationale for the inclusion of animals within social work practice, through these twin lenses of deep ecology and attachment theory, I was providing a practical demonstration. Having ascertained that the classroom was a closed

system, I demonstrated participation in the ecology, and attachment relationships, in a very practical manner. Occasionally, I approached the other lecturer, and greeted them softly with a lick on the hand, before returning to my primary attachment figure. When new people entered the room, I greeted them, and then returned to base, both to reassure and to receive reassurance, thus allowing for a brief acknowledgement of the 'oxytocin' literature that informs a psychological appreciation of the bond between humans and other animals (Nagasawa et al., 2015; O'Haire, 2010) as well as a practical illustration of the need for observing behaviour – both animal and human – when working with service users.

Locating this knowledge within a classroom of students at the point of their final practicum provided the imperative to suggest practical steps that practitioners and agencies could take. Informed by both 'environments-including-humans' and attachment principles, practical assessment strategies were suggested. Asking about companion animals may help build rapport (Evans & Perez-y.-Perez, 2013) and can elucidate important information about relationships and family functioning. We suggested including animals in genograms and ecomaps (Walsh, 2009) and, as an indication of class engagement, one student searched online and reported that a diamond shape was considered to be the correct symbol for animals within genogram construction. Connection to knowledge about grief and loss was made through recognition that losing a companion animal may mean that an individual loses a significant support and experiences complications in their recovery from a disaster (Evans & Perez-y.-Perez (2013). Such grief may be disenfranchised and un/under-recognised by workers and agencies with a solely human focus (Donohue, 2005; Morley & Fook, 2005).

The systems significance of animal-informed disaster planning and response was highlighted within the lecture through a subsequent discussion concerning the responsibility of HSOs at both intra-agency and inter-agency levels. Animal-inclusive planning is supported at macro and exo levels through interagency cooperation, and the need for advanced planning, networking and agreements was highlighted. The second author's summer scholarship enabled development of an understanding, supported by literature, that disaster-oriented organisations remain anthropocentric in orientation and seldom have working plans for the care and evacuation of companion animals (e.g., Irvine, 2006): an email response elicited in preparation for the lecture from the RSPCA (the national coordinating body for the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (SPCA) branches in Aotearoa New Zealand) indicated that planning with Civil Defence and Emergency Management within our country is still at a national planning and development level and has not translated into sound local agency practice. The imperative for social work practitioners, therefore, is to supplement any national-level planning through grassroots local development of networks and practical planning: since separation and abandonment of companion animals may constitute risks in a disaster context (Potts & Gadenne, 2014), the imperative for practitioners is to consider factors such as pet-friendly accommodation (Heath & Linnabary, 2015; Ministry of Civil Defence & Emergency Management, 2010) and the location of foster parents or animal shelters (Morley & Fook, 2005). Registers of vulnerable people who may be required to evacuate with their companion animals (for example, those using seeing-eye or assistance dogs) can be created (Mills, 2015). Proactive planning including the microchipping of animals and the provision of animal carriers can be encouraged (Palika, 2006), and as Thompson et al.

(2014) suggest, discussion of these matters may encourage consideration of disaster planning amongst those reluctant to consider such eventualities.

From these considerations, we have come to understand that the development of local knowledge in regard to animal welfare in a disaster context has broader implications for social work practice than just this context: individual and family challenges (be they domestic violence, homelessness, ill-health or ageing) may generate the need for this local knowledge to be activated in relationship to humans and their companion animals. It is as a result of attention to the need for animal-inclusive disaster practice by HSOs that our focus was drawn to the need for social work practice to consider animals when working with the impact of domestic violence.

DOMESTIC VIOLENCE, ANIMALS AND SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

The knowledge bases chosen for this lecture – deep ecology and attachment – established both a theoretical rationale for the consideration of animals within social work and human service practice, and a practical imperative for animal inclusion within the two focal points of disaster response and domestic violence. We found that students readily engaged with the argument that animals, as part of the ecological system in which we live, experienced similar needs in times of crisis. Building on the initial disaster focus in the lecture, an animal-inclusive stance transferred readily into an introduction of a domestic violence context. A teaching session on domestic violence and the learning from mortality reviews had occurred the week prior to this 'Animals and social work' lecture, and students were now provided with a brief overview of the link between animal cruelty and domestic violence. The teaching suggested that social workers may overlook warning signs indicating animal abuse or neglect and that opportunities to intervene appropriately are therefore missed (Ryan, 2011). We provided an overview of the research, commenting on how perpetrators' use of overt threats and actual harm to animals is a mechanism to attain and maintain control of their family, how family-violence-related animal cruelty is most commonly reported as a form of punishment, how animals may be pawns in instances of jealousy, violence-by-proxy, or used as sexual objects (DeGue, 2011; Faver & Strand, 2003; Roguski, 2012; Williams, Dale, Clarke, & Garrett, 2008). Roguski's study highlights the attachment-informed dynamics of delaying leaving and the potential erosion of victims' concern for animals under extreme threat to their own wellbeing. As with disaster planning, students were made aware of the practitioner- and organisational-level planning that is vital to the support of victims in domestic violence. The impact on children resonated with the students' prior learning about child abuse and protection: where animal abuse is threatened or occurs within a home, children will often attempt to intervene or prevent this abuse and are able to understand the intent of this violence as a tool to manipulate or control others (McDonald, Graham-Bermann, Maternick, Ascione, & Williams, 2015).

The lecture addressed a systems-level appreciation of animal-inclusive practice in the context of domestic violence. In preparation for this lecture, information regarding an existing memorandum of understanding (MOU) between Women's Refuge and the RSPCA was sought from both organisations. Approaching both agencies in order to locate a copy of the MOU proved difficult, and a conclusion was drawn by the authors that, whilst an

agreement for cooperation and exchange of information had been made in 2013, the reality for practitioners at the organisational level is that local connections need to be forged and maintained in order for any MOU to be effective.

Ida's commentary: *One of the important illustrations about the human–animal connection, and how each one of us regards the other, was able to be illustrated here. Domestic violence situations will be common environments for social work practitioners, and through my inter-actions with the student group in this classroom, it was clear to all presenters that some stu-dents related more easily to dogs than did others. Anxiety about how to approach animals was acknowledged as a personal, social and sometimes culturally embedded reality. Through a gentle request for someone less confident in human–canine interaction, Carole and I were able to demonstrate the power of food as a communication tool (a hide bone was presented to the student and some coaching about how to give it to me was given). A practical sugg-estion – to always carry dog treats when visiting – was greeted with some amusement but also with recognition that stressed dogs living in potentially violent environments may have their anxieties reassured by the gift of food.*

Embedding and infiltrating the curriculum: the process of social change

As signalled in our introduction, the challenge that we sought to meet in this lecture was to insert material about an under-recognised component of social work practice into existing curriculum structures and content. Through a focus on animal-inclusive practice within disaster and domestic violence contexts, new theoretical connections were forged between students' existing knowledge and some practice realities that may not hitherto have been considered within their experience of social work education and practice. Engaging Ida's services within the teaching space confirmed Westcott's argument that animals may provide a bridge by which practitioners and organisations can more easily incorporate new dimensions into their practice and planning (2015): student feedback and evaluations indicated that this new dimension to their practice *kete* (basket) was a welcome enhancement. One student commented in her reflective log:

This for me is the best example of the creativeness that turns social work practice into 'best practice' in specific context. I think working with animals is a really good way of engaging with people. I am passionate about animals myself and see the value animals provide for people and the therapeutic qualities they offer. Engaging with people and their companion animals is a brilliant way to build rapport and build a working relationship; they may also provide insight into interventions that will be beneficial for the service user. These animals often provide hope and are significant supports for people with less people support networks.

Another reflected that the lecture content would assist her in her current practicum in mental health:

[The lecture] opened up my perspectives and made me realize that I have undermined the role of animals in my own life (since I do not have any animal anymore at the moment) and in others, including my family and some friends. More importantly, it does make full sense now and I will make sure to be mindful of this during placement in mental health as I have already encountered clients whose notes mentioned presence of pets but I did not further question this aspect.

Ida's commentary: *For me, this confirms the legitimacy of an animal-inclusive stance within the social work curriculum. The environmental realities for people in the country in which I live include the human–animal bond in an active and real sense, as my presence in the classroom demonstrated. The practice realities for these future practitioners need to be premised upon the moral and legal foundations that animals are sentient beings with whom humans have bonds which, in turn, determine behaviour and decision-making. I am proud to live in a country that recognises animals as sentient beings (the Animal Welfare Amendment Act (No. 2) (2015) in Aotearoa New Zealand, which amended the Animal Welfare Act 1999, specifically recognises animals as sentient). By my inclusion within the teaching team, I think this was demonstrated in a very real and practical manner, the learning from which can be taken into future practice.*

As a practical demonstration of the link between social work theory and practice within a teaching and learning environment and social change, this module on animal-inclusive practice is a sound beginning. However, the acquisition of critical consciousness is a recognised step towards social change, and this lecture served also as a platform for John Darroch to discuss the focus of their current post-graduate research into social workers' perceptions of social justice. He acknowledged his personal experience as an animal rights activist. This enabled the wider question of social work's relationship to activism, organisational codes of practice, and civil law to be raised. Students were left with the challenge of when to work within the law, and whether there is ever a mandate from social work values to sometimes step beyond current legal boundaries.

The involvement of companion animals within education is not without ethical challenges. Unlike the use of animals for military or policing purposes, where direct risk may be experienced to animals and handlers alike (and perhaps a challenge made in regard to exposure of animals to risks of human creation), a teaching environment, as with the incorporation of animals into therapeutic environments and processes, may yet contain stressors or other harmful elements for the animals concerned. We are not aware of guidelines for involving animals in pedagogical encounters, but ethical considerations can be drawn from similar settings such as animal-assisted therapy (for instance, McConnell & Fine, 2010). Selection of canine presenters should be made on the basis of maturity and previous behaviour in group settings. For this lecture, Ida's behaviour was monitored by her co-presenters and, as her ability to affiliate to humans was well established, she maintained an alert but relaxed demeanour throughout the lecture. Risks to students, too, were considered: students were forewarned that a dog was attending class, and neither attendance nor interaction was enforced, and both human presenters were alert to any displays of discomfort. Any future teaching will also consult students in regard to the potential for allergic reactions to dog hair.

CONCLUSIONS

Whilst this lecture provided an effective introduction to the importance of considering animals in practice, we believe that there are further opportunities to deepen and build upon this learning. As a pragmatic first step we have suggested that colleagues begin incorporating material relating to companion animals in other courses offered within social work programmes. There is scope, for instance, to expand on students' understanding of attachment theory in relation to the human–animal bond, and to consider

the human relationship to, and responsibility for, non-domesticated animals. Only a brief acknowledgement of the foundational knowledge of attachment theory was made within the lecture, but the scoping of the literature for this article suggests that an attachment lens can be significant in the consideration of, for instance, the calming effects of animals for stress reduction through an understanding of the physiology of arousal and soothing (Nagasawa et al., 2015) and through field-specific use of animals in therapeutic interventions such as animals in rest homes, equine therapy or the use of assistance dogs for those living with disabilities. As a result of this lecture and the curriculum discussions that ensued, we can also envisage, for instance, the inclusion of animal material within mental health and disability courses; within attention to self-care plans drawn up prior to practicum; and including animal interaction within child observation opportunities. Similarly, whilst deep ecological principles are less well considered within many social work theoretical curricula, there is a legitimate argument to be made for exploration of principles of sustainability, environmental change and the human place within ecology to be embedded within social work theory, social policy and community development courses. This rationale is strengthened by the commitment of social work education to indigenous perspectives that regard human beings as kaitiaki, or caretakers of the land on behalf of future generations.

We are confident that, for this cohort of students proceeding into practice, they will not unlearn or forget the importance of animal-inclusive practice: the challenge remains as to whether such individual practice awareness can translate into organisational change. A significant development following the lecture was the initiative taken by one of the post-graduate social work students – on placement within a statutory child protection agency, they have chosen to implement a project looking at the nature of attachment and animals. The project has a dual focus: on disruptions to children's relationships with animals if they are involved with child protection services and on how mistreatment of animals can be an early warning sign of intimate partner violence.

The matrix of concepts, theory and practice realities for this teaching exercise was woven between disasters, domestic violence and animals: we present this as an illustration of the creative opportunities that lie within social work and human services education to forge new links between knowledge bases. Current challenges to the communities in which social work is embedded require, in our view, a constant process of refreshing and updating the social work curriculum, to provide new perspectives on the mix of theoretical approaches, skills and practice considerations taught within our programmes. Juxtaposing animals with the concepts and practice issues related to disaster response and domestic violence interventions produced new learning and a reframing of familiar theory for students. Social work curricula, we argue, can be usefully audited, not only for its attention to disaster and domestic violence content, but for its animal-inclusive stance, in a way that more accurately mirrors the lives of the people with whom we engage.

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