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The Relevance of Human–Animal Interaction for Social Work Practice

Human bonds with animals can be powerful, even lifesaving. While working as a social worker doing suicide risk assessments, one of this book's authors, Janet, would routinely ask each client, "What has stopped you from acting on your suicidal plans?" The purpose of this question was to evoke from each client the strengths and protective factors—specific to that person—that had helped to keep that client alive up to that point. Responses included, but were not limited to, having children, faith and spiritual beliefs opposing suicide, fear of death, not wanting to hurt loved ones, and *not wanting to leave animals behind*. Certainly, not every person Janet spoke with who was suicidal referenced having an animal who needed him or her as a reason for still being alive, but this answer was provided frequently enough that it was apparent that having an animal could be a powerful strength and protective factor against suicide for at least some at-risk individuals. Concerns about not wanting to leave an animal behind also posed some challenges in accessing inpatient mental health care for individuals who lived alone and did not have the means to provide care for the animal if they were hospitalized.

This profound connection to animals is not unique. A Google search or journal literature review will quickly yield descriptions of individuals in domestic violence situations who delay leaving for fear of their animals being harmed, individuals in disaster situations who did not want to evacuate because they were told that they had to leave their animals behind, and individuals declining to use housing shelters because they could not bring their animals. Fitzgerald (2007) interviewed a sample of survivors of domestic violence and found several participants who cited their companion animals as a major motivation to live when they

were feeling suicidal. Conversely, the academic literature and Internet are replete with studies, news articles, and anecdotes of the many benefits of both formal and informal connections with animals. After the horrific mass shootings of children at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut, therapy dogs offered a source of comfort to mourners (Cunningham & Edelman, 2012, para. 2). On the basis of feedback from the Newtown community emphatically endorsing the value and necessity of the comfort derived from these dogs, Connecticut became the first state to codify animal-assisted therapy programming for trauma survivors into state law:

> Therapy dogs were an integral part of helping surviving children heal emotionally, according to Steven Hernandez, an attorney for the state legislature's Commission on Children.
>
> "They were a constant source of care, comfort and innocence," he told legislators at a committee hearing. "The dogs welcomed the children and sat with them. Their touch and sensitivity made what was almost unbearable, bearable."
>
> Proponents of the measure cited studies that have found positive health effects on children who interact with animals, such as lowered blood pressure and decreases in cortisol—a hormone associated with stress.
>
> "They love unconditionally, are nonjudgmental, are empathetic, and enjoy the company of children," said Lauren Crowley, a licensed social worker at a school-based health center in New Britain, Conn, at a committee hearing. (Wogan, 2013, paras. 4–7)

Whether through interactions with registered therapy dogs or informal daily interactions and routines with beloved companion animals, for many people, animals matter. According to the 2015–2016 American Pet Products Association (APPA) Survey—the largest demographic survey of households with companion animals in the United States—65 percent of U.S. households reported having at least one animal, and the majority of these households reported considering their animals to be family members (APPA, 2015). In our training as social workers, we are taught to understand clients within their ecologies and systems; moreover, in engaging and working with clients, we are taught to start "where the client is at." Companion animals are very often an important part of those ecologies.

In recent years, the bonds between humans and companion animals have been increasingly recognized as significant in both social work practice and educational settings (Tedeschi, Fitchett, & Molidor, 2005). Exemplars of related education innovations in social work include the University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work's animal-assisted social work certificate program (University of Denver Graduate School of Social Work, n.d.) and the University of Tennessee's Veterinary Social Work Certificate Program (http://vetsocialwork.utk.edu/). Despite such groundbreaking innovations in social work education related to human–animal interactions (HAIs), the vast majority of social work education and practice settings still do not include routine consideration of companion animals within a given human client system (Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Turner, 2005; Walker, Aimers, & Perry, 2015). Omitting the potential significance of animals in the lives of clients from social work practice misses an opportunity to effectively harness an existing strength (for example, the ability to connect with and care for a companion animal) or resource (the companionship or social support derived from a companion animal) within a given client system (Netting, Wilson, & New, 1987). Conversely, such an omission may also preclude identification of a client stressor or barrier; for instance, a client may be experiencing disenfranchised grief because of the death of a cherished companion animal (Chur-Hansen, 2010; Doka, 2002) or may be unwilling to leave an abusive relationship because she or he does not wish to leave a beloved pet behind to go to a shelter that does not permit companion animals (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye, & Campbell, 2005). As put by Risley-Curtiss (2013) in a call for child welfare practitioners and administrators to expand their ecological lens in practice to be inclusive of animals, it

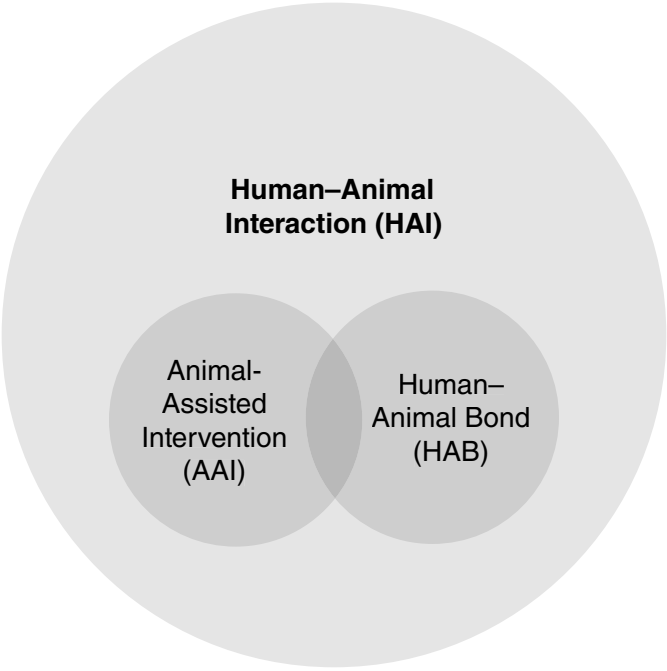
> does not matter what they think of animals—whether they have them, like them, or not. It is the place that animals may have in the ecologies of the families (e.g., the interconnectedness of animals and humans) they serve and therefore how that may impact the 'life of the case' that is important. . . . Once this understanding is achieved, it would seem reasonable to incorporate observations and questions about the presence of animals in/at homes and the meaning those animals have for the family members into investigations and any other assessments. (pp. 121–122)

Current social work ethics, values, and guiding theoretical perspectives underscore the importance of taking into consideration the relevance of companion animals and HAI as potential strengths or stressors for a given client system, then addressing and integrating them across areas of social work practice. Within this chapter, we explicate terms such as HAI and human–animal bond (HAB); explore the current social work ethical values and theoretical perspectives that support routine inclusion of HAI within social work practice; delineate barriers and facilitators to inclusion of HAI within social work; and situate the contributions of this book within the larger moral questions, such as speciesism, facing social workers when they consider HAI.

Terminology: HAI versus HAB

Although living with companion animals may be considered by many to be a primarily modern or Western phenomenon, historical evidence indicates otherwise: Dogs and cats were kept as companions in ancient societies of Egypt, Greece, Rome, China, and Japan (Serpell, 2011). As defined within the emerging field of anthrozoology (a combination of anthropology and zoology), *HAI* entails "the full range of people's associations with animals, including wildlife, pets, therapy, agriculture, zoo, and laboratory animals" (Serpell & McCune, 2012, p. 6). The American Veterinary Medical Association (n.d.) similarly defined *HAI* as encompassing "any situation where there is interchange between human(s) and animal(s) at an individual or cultural level. These interactions are diverse and idiosyncratic, and may be fleeting or profound" (para. 1). For terminological and conceptual clarity and to maximize relevance to social work practice, within this book, we focus specifically on the following smaller subsets of HAI (see Figure 1.1): (1) HAI with animals that is considered to be therapeutic but in which there is no ongoing relationship or bond between the human and animal and (2) HAI that occurs between humans and companion animals (either naturalistically by residing together or otherwise knowing each other or through ongoing formal therapeutic interactions) who share a bond, often referred to as the HAB.

Figure 1.1: Overlap in Human–Animal Terminology



The term *bond* typically refers to close, reciprocal relationships. Although often used to refer to human relationships, it is also routinely used to describe relationships between other types of mammals, birds, and other species. The importance of mutual well-being (for both human and animal) is emphasized as a core component of the HAB by multiple researchers (Beck, 1999; Hosey & Melfi, 2014; Russow, 2002). Russow (2002) acknowledged that there is no agreed-on definition of the HAB and offered three generally established criteria to differentiate HABs from other types of HAIs: (1) There is a relationship between an individual animal and a person in which mutual recognition occurs, (2) the relationship is reciprocal and persistent, and (3) the relationship tends to promote well-being for both the human and the animal. Although such criteria for defining an HAB are relatively easy to operationalize for humans, it may be less clear with animals; as stated by Hosey and Melfi (2014),

> It would seem that there is the additional requirement to show reciprocity and an increase in well-being in both interactants. This is considerably more feasible to do with human interactants

> than with animals, which presumably accounts for the paucity of studies on this. It is probably true to say that both an increase in well-being and reciprocity in companion animals is usually assumed rather than demonstrated. (p. 126)

For an exhaustive literature review of the various terms and definitions used for HAI and the HAB, readers are directed to Hosey and Melfi's (2014) review. A typical definition of *HAB* is offered by the American Veterinary Medical Association (n.d.):

> The human-animal bond is a mutually beneficial and dynamic relationship between people and animals that is influenced by behaviors considered essential to the health and well-being of both. This includes, but is not limited [to,] emotional, psychological, and physical interactions of people, animals, and the environment. The veterinarian's role in the human-animal bond is to maximize the potential of this relationship between people and animals and specifically to promote the health and well-being of both. (para. 2)

Social Work Ethical Values and Theoretical Perspectives That Support Inclusion of HAI within Social Work Practice

Supporting the positive potentials of relationships between people and animals is not a role that is limited to the veterinary profession. Given that the primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2015, Preamble section), helping to maximize the positive potentials of relationships between people and animals is a salient role for social workers as well as veterinarians. According to the NASW (2015) *Code of Ethics*, social workers are called to obtain education about, seek to understand, and promote conditions that encourage respect for social diversity; moreover, the responsibilities of social workers to promote client well-being and to respect and support clients' right to self-determination are explicitly stated (NASW, 2015, Preamble section). Features of social

diversity include, but are not restricted to, race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, age, marital status, political belief, religion, immigration status, and mental or physical disability (NASW, 2015, Ethical Standards section). Social diversity can be more broadly understood as "all of the ways that people within a single culture are set apart from each other" ("Social Diversity," n.d., para. 1). Generally understood definitions of social diversity are inclusive of ethnicity, lifestyle, religion, language, tastes, and preferences ("Social Diversity," n.d.). HAI and the HAB, along with the meanings humans ascribe to such interactions and bonds, can be significant positive or negative aspects of clients' lifestyles and social experiences.

Human clients may identify animals as family members (Turner, 2005), consider animals to be vital parts of their support networks (Wood et al., 2015), and grieve on the death of an animal (Rujoiu & Rujoiu, 2013; Turner, 2003). Children have included animals within family drawings (Kidd & Kidd, 1995) and identified animals as important confidantes in their social networks (McNicholas & Collis, 2001). At a neighborhood level, the presence of companion animals in households has been found to increase the number of positive interactions between neighbors (Wood et al., 2015) and has been identified as social capital (Arkow, 2015a). HAIs have a social component; HAIs can and should be understood and responded to within the context of a client's unique social diversity.

Several theoretical models used in social work further support the inclusion of HAI in practice: ecosystems theory, family systems theory, and the strengths perspective (Risley-Curtiss, Rogge, & Kawam, 2013). As explained by Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007), two widely recognized authors of social work education texts, a system is defined as "a set of elements that are orderly and interrelated to make a functional whole. A large nation, a public social services department, and a newly married couple are all examples of systems" (p. 12). System theories are described as "concepts that emphasize interactions and relationships among various systems, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, or communities" (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007, p. 12). As cited in Zastrow and Kirst-Ashman (2007), Beckett and Johnson defined ecosystems theory as "systems theory used to describe and analyze people and other living systems and their transactions" (p. 14). Given that nonhuman animals are living beings that interact with human systems in ways that may affect the

human systems, such transactions clearly fall within the purview of ecological systems theory application in social work practice. These animals may also be explicitly identified by a client to be part of his or her family system. Family systems theory, an extension of systems theory applied to family units, is widely used to understand families in social work practice. Given that the majority of households with companion animals identify the animals as family members (APPA, 2015), social workers are very likely to encounter clients who identify companion animals as part of their family systems. Simply put, a human–animal relationship may be a key aspect of a client's ecology or self-defined family system. Incorporating such relationships into social work assessment and intervention enables social workers to address them as appropriate, for example, as strengths, stressors, or both for a given client.

HAI and the HAB can benefit humans in many ways. For example, in the beginning of this chapter, we briefly described how Janet encountered clients who refrained from acting on suicidal ideations because they did not want to leave their companion animals behind. In these instances, HABs were powerful client strengths that could be drawn on to help evoke motivation to live. The strengths perspective as used in social work practice "focuses on client resources, capacities, knowledge, abilities, motivations, experience, intelligence, and other positive qualities that can be put to use to solve problems and pursue positive changes" (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2007, p. 6). Chapter 3 of this book extensively details the physical, psychological, and social benefits of HAI and frames these as potential client strengths to be proactively identified and built on in social work assessment and intervention. The presence and meaning of animals in a client's life are not routinely explicitly asked about in suicide assessment, yet anecdotal evidence suggests companion animals may be a powerful and underidentified protective factor in suicide intervention. It is imperative that potential client strengths—especially when such strengths may be extremely salient for a given client—not be overlooked in social work practice. Routine consideration of HAI and the HAB in social work assessment and intervention ensures that such potential client strengths will not be overlooked, underused, or outright ignored.

Barriers to and Facilitators of Inclusion of HAI within Social Work

Given such compelling rationales for routine inclusion of HAI considerations within social work practice, it may seem odd that the majority of social workers are not addressing HAI (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Risley-Curtiss, in a 2010 national study, found that one-third of social workers included questions about companion animals and other animals in intake assessments, and less than a fourth of social workers addressed HAI concerns in their interventions. She also found that the majority of these social workers had no training or coursework enabling them to include HAI within their practice. Through additional analysis, Risley-Curtiss et al. (2013) considered how particular factors affected four distinct ways HAIs were incorporated into practice: inclusion of questions about animals in intake assessments, inclusion of animals in interventions (also known as animal-assisted intervention [AAI]), treatment for animal abuse, and treatment of animal loss. As shown in Table 1.1 on page 10, the single factor associated with increased inclusion of HAI across all four practice areas is knowing other social workers who include HAI considerations in their practice.

Hence, each individual social worker has the capacity to influence other social workers to address HAI considerations and can ultimately help to transform the profession into one that routinely considers and addresses such potentially integral aspects of clients' ecologies.

Barriers to inclusion of HAI in social work include but are not limited to lack of knowledge, staff, time, and administration-initiated direction; preformatted fields on forms available through current electronic software; issues of confidentiality; and speciesism (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). A lack of knowledge can be rectified by infusing HAI in social work curriculum, supervision, and continuing education and informally sharing HAI-related resources among social workers. Staff and time shortages are ongoing plagues in most areas of social work practice; social workers are often expected to do too much with too little, and having to attend to the additional component of HAI could be perceived as burdening already overworked social work practitioners. Using existing resources to smoothly and usefully integrate HAI considerations into existing practice

Table 1.1: Factors Associated with Addressing Human–Animal Interaction (HAI) in Social Work Practice

	Type of HAI Practice Inclusion			
Practitioner Factor	Assessment Questions	Animal-Assisted Intervention	Treatment of Animal Abuse	Treatment of Animal Loss
Serves primarily the children	✓			
Serves primarily elderly	✓			
Serves primarily nonelderly adults				✓
Has information on human–animal violence interconnections	✓	✓		
Has information on HAI benefits to humans		✓		
Has information on treating animal loss issues		✓		✓
Has information on treating animal abuse	✓		✓	
Asks about HAI in assessment				✓
Experience treating clients for animal loss	✓		✓	
Experience treating clients for animal abuse				
Experience including animals in interventions			✓	✓
Has specialized training in including HAI in practice		✓		
Knows social workers who include HAI issues in practice	✓	✓	✓	✓
Has own companion animal(s)		✓		✓
Wants to know more about HAI issues in practice	✓	✓		

Source: Adapted from "Factors Affecting Social Workers' Inclusion of Animals in Practice," by C. Risley-Curtiss, M. E. Rogge, and E. Kawam, 2013, *Social Work, 58*, pp. 156–160.

contexts can help to smooth such transitions (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Administrative support and direction is also crucial in addressing time and staff shortages. Dissemination of information on the benefits of HAI inclusion in practice needs to continue to occur to engage agency leaders in adopting and supporting such practices. Electronic forms with preformatted fields may pose challenges in including HAI content; engaging with IT staff and considering practices such as use of supplemental fields or scanned documents may help mitigate this problem. Confidentiality may pose a challenge when a client is engaging in animal abuse or neglect; chapter 4 in this book explores in depth how the NASW *Code of Ethics* and existing reporting laws can provide guidance in such matters.

The implementation of any new practice or practice change typically involves one or more of the challenges described above; however, social work practice is necessarily dynamic rather than static. It is incumbent on social workers to continually improve social work practice by incorporating new knowledge and skills—including knowledge and skills related to HAI—so that the mission of the profession, to enhance human well-being, will ultimately be better fulfilled. The inclusion of HAI consideration in social work practice also enables social workers to improve the well-being of nonhuman animals; although nonhuman animals are not explicitly mentioned in the NASW (2015) *Code of Ethics*, the code does contain numerous references to social workers' responsibilities to the broader society. Given the interconnections between violence toward animals and violence toward humans—addressed in detail in chapter 5 of this book—the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) recently began treating animal abuse offenses as crimes against society and counting such offenses alongside felony crimes such as arson, assault, and homicide (FBI, 2016); it is not a stretch for the social work profession to do the same.

Larger Ethical Questions: Speciesism and Social Work Consideration of HAI

As elucidated throughout this chapter, compelling rationales exist for the routine inclusion of HAI within current social work ethics codes, values, and theoretical perspectives. However, these rationales are embedded primarily in the assumption that consideration of HAI is necessary in

social work practice because of concern for human well-being. The responsibility of the social work profession toward the well-being of nonhuman animals, in and of itself, is a larger question emerging in various venues. Specifically, the question of how social work should respond to speciesism has been posed. Hanrahan (2011), writing from a critical antioppressive social work practice paradigm, explicitly called for social work to expand its value framework so as to include efforts toward eradicating speciesism and its counterpart of anthropocentrism (automatically prioritizing human animals over other animals). Through such an expansion of values, Hanrahan (2011) argued, the potential of the social work profession to enhance well-being for humans, animals, and the planet would be increased.

As explicated by Ryan (2014), the word *speciesist* was "coined in 1970 by clinical psychologist Richard Ryder (1983) and popularized by Singer to describe those who treat sentient and morally equivalent beings differently on the basis of species alone, rather than giving them equal consideration" (p. 68). Speciesism is essentially discrimination based on species. Peter Singer, author of the 1975 book *Animal Liberation: A New Ethic for Our Treatment of Animals*, which widely influenced the trajectory of the animal liberation movement, acknowledged that there were differences between humans and other animals that should give rise to some differences in the rights that each have. In particular, Singer argued that capacity to suffer (for example, to experience distress or pain) should be the benchmark for moral consideration of interests (P. Singer, 1975). As put by philosopher Jeremy Bentham (1789), "The question is not, Can they reason? Nor Can they talk? But, Can they suffer?" (pp. 235–236).

Ryan, in his 2014 seminal edited book titled *Animals in Social Work: Why and How They Matter*, offered an outstanding examination of the moral and ethical arguments for consideration of the well-being of other species within and across areas of social work practice. Ryan (2014), along with numerous other social work scholars, argued that the profession of social work emerged through efforts to protect and assist those who were vulnerable and institutionally marginalized by existing laws and policies; therefore, the social work ethical principle of respect must be extended to encompass nonhuman as well as human animals. Specifically, Ryan explicated the importance of valuing and protecting vulnerable beings, including nonhuman animals, as a moral imperative

within social work practice, and he grounded this imperative in a series of chapters authored by social workers in different areas of social work practice. Distinguishing between humans and animals is a false dichotomy, as humans are mammals; for ease of terminology and reading, we hereafter refer to nonhuman animals as *animals* while acknowledging the flaws and biases inherent in this language choice. In keeping with the progressive view on animals as sentient beings rather than inanimate property, we avoid using the term "ownership" and its derivatives unless doing so is contextually necessary. For us to revisit the arguments Ryan has rigorously and passionately presented is both redundant and beyond the scope and focus of this book. We concur with Ryan's transformative conclusions and urge readers to review and consider his work.

The purpose of our book is to equip social workers to understand the importance of and routinely include HAI considerations across social work practice settings, with the hope of improving the well-being of both humans and animals. Given existing empirical and theoretical knowledge and the current NASW (2015) *Code of Ethics* guidelines pertaining to social workers' responsibilities to their clients and broader society, the social work profession is currently ethically obligated to consider HAI in practice. Irrespective of whether a social worker cares about animals and whether or not that social worker thinks speciesism should be included in social work ethics codes, one indisputable fact demands routine consideration of HAI in social work practice: For many human clients, animals matter.