Human–Animal Interaction Knowledge is not Just for the “Animal People” in Social Work

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Human–animal interaction (HAI) within social work is often relegated to being a specialty or “niche” area practiced by social workers who are “animal people” and confined to activities such as animal-assisted therapy (AAT) and social work support in veterinary practice settings. While HAI considerations within social work practice certainly encompasses such specialized applications of HAI-related knowledge, the need to address HAI within social work is much broader, cutting across practice areas and populations. According to the American Pet Products Association 2019–2020 annual survey—the largest and most comprehensive demographic survey on pet ownership in the United States—approximately 67% of households in the U.S. report having at least one pet, and the majority of those report that they consider the pet to be a family member. There is an emerging base of empirical support pointing to substantive emotional, physical, psychological, and social benefits people can experience through having a pet; likewise, a bond with a pet can also be a source of significant stress due to issues such as pet loss, cost of pet care, and pet behavior issues. Most youth and families we work with are likely to have at least one pet within their ecological system, and there is a likelihood that a pet may have a significant role for that youth/family.

As social workers, we are trained to “start where our client is at”; despite such, these animals in our clients’ lives are often ignored as both significant strengths and possible stressors. This needs to be rectified, starting with how we think about the importance of animals within social work.

Basic consideration of HAI within social work practice has nothing to do with being an “animal person” or “animal lover” (although it can certainly help with sensitizing to the import of such), and everything to do with being a competent social work practitioner who is proactively inclusive of relationships that are important to our clients, *including their relationships with their pets*. Our hope in curating this special issue is that awareness will be raised on the significance of HAI within social work, both as a specialized practice area and as a general client consideration to be responsive to across practice settings.

The lead article by Phil Arkow, Director of the National Link Coalition sets the tone for this issue by describing and advocating for social work to broaden the practices beyond veterinary social work and AAT to consider the many ways that animals are relevant and impactful in the ecosystems of youth and families. Continuing in this vein of considering pets within the client ecosystem, the next two articles explore pets in the home. Linda Charmaraman, Megan Mueller and Amanda Richer investigate the role of pet companionship in online and offline adolescent interactions. Angela Matijczak and Shelby McDonald then explore the relationships between animal cruelty exposure of children and their positive relationships with pets when homes are characterized by the presence of intimate partner violence.

The issue lens then narrows from broad practice focus on the import of pets in client to specific forms of animal assisted therapies which social workers have been implementing or evaluating. Aviva Vincent writes about how therapy dogs can positively impact pediatric dental anxiety and potentially reduce dental avoidance by children. She provides preliminary findings on the role of biological markers associated with the presence of therapy dogs, and the implementation of the treatment in a dental office. Green Chimneys in upstate New York, a respected provider of services to children and youth, uses animal therapies as part of classroom, residential and experiential interventions. Flynn, Gardenberger, Mueller and Morris explore how the

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therapeutic staff perceive these interventions to be helping troubled youth. This paper leads into two papers about how equine therapies are used with troubled youth and adolescents. Craig focuses on children with adverse childhood experiences and how working with horses helps youth to develop skills in emotional regulation and expression. She approaches this from a communication perspective which provides a completely different perspective to social work practice. The second equine-focused article from Harvey and colleagues is an evaluation of equine therapy programs and troubled youths. What is exciting about this article is its generation from a community-based practice as an example of a careful evaluation in a real-life setting. Obtaining funding for equine-focused interventions however is challenging and Ballard and Vincent provide an analysis of policies and critique current funding.

Our issue concludes with a submission from the Czech Republic, returning us to a universal setting (schools) and a focus on the import of HAI, through considering how such can be relevant for children in education settings. While our colleagues present a case study of using therapy animals with children with attention disorders—a specialized application of HAI knowledge—in this instance the purpose of involving these animals is to help integrate classrooms. School is a universal experience and children have a right to receive an education in the least restrictive setting; the

benefits offered through HAI may help to facilitate such for kids at-risk of being excluded from mainstream classrooms, and HAI warrants additional exploration as an intervention for such.

We are grateful to the authors of the articles noted above for all of their insights and work, and thank them for helping to illuminate the general and specialized ways that HAI is relevant for social work practice with children, youth and families. Whatever our personal opinion of and experiences with animals, “...one indisputable fact demands routine consideration of HAI in social work practice: for many of our human clients, animals matter” (Hoy-Gerlach & Wehman, 2017).

References

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