

# Human-Animal Interaction in Social Work: A Call to Action

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## Abstract

A considerable body of research has documented the physical, psychological and social benefits of human-animal interaction. Despite these promising findings, the field of social work has been slow to adopt practices from this emergent area of study. Through a discussion of empirical findings, the authors explore specific strategies for implementing HAI into social work education and practice. Furthermore, the authors urge the field of social work to acknowledge the efficacy of human-animal interaction by incorporating relevant material into coursework across the social work curricula, promoting the adoption of evidence-based practices from HAI research, and expanding the definition of ‘relationships’ in the NASW Code of Ethics to include relationships with non-human animals.

*Keywords:* human-animal interaction, social work, education, ethics, animal-assisted therapy

## Introduction

A growing body of research on human-animal interaction (HAI) over the past several decades has indicated significant physical, psychological and social benefits (Becker, Rogers, & Burrows, 2017; Handlin et al., 2011; Hu, Zhang, Leng, Li, & Chen, 2018; Hunt & Chizkov, 2014; Meehan, Massavelli, & Pachana, 2017). Meanwhile, the field of social work has been slow to adopt practices from this emergent area of study and, thus,

HAI remains neglected in mainstream social work curriculum. The role that non-human animals serve provides social workers with a unique lens into the functioning and dynamics of client relationships. Thus, HAI has the potential to facilitate client engagement by creating opportunities exclusive to this type of interaction. It is time for the larger field of social work to acknowledge the potential of HAI by incorporating practices into the curriculum for social work students and ultimately integrating HAI as a common practice.

## Conceptual Definitions

HAI can be understood as “any situation where there is an interchange between human(s) and animal(s) at an individual or cultural level. These interactions are diverse, idiosyncratic, and may be fleeting or profound” (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], n.d.). This can be distinguished from the human-animal bond (HAB) which exists as a specific category within the umbrella of HAI. The HAB 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” (AVMA, n.d.).

Certified therapy dogs serve as a common example of HAI in the therapeutic setting, interacting with clients or patients, in dyads or groups. Therapy dogs are generally accompanied by a handler. However, clinicians may incorporate

the presence of a therapy dog (i.e. their personal, companion dog) into their practice, which serves to put clients at ease, build rapport, and improve their receptiveness to therapeutic interventions (Chandler, 2005). On the other hand, HAB involves more regular interaction with an animal. A typical example of this relationship would be that of humans and their service animals. These animals are trained accordingly so that they may be owned by a singular individual who benefits therapeutically from their partnership.

### **Animals in Social Work**

Social workers are fundamentally responsible for developing holistic, personalized interventions for clients. In many cases, client receptiveness to the presence of a therapy animal serves as an untapped resource for addressing a variety of issues (Parish-Plass, 2018; Policay & Falconier, 2018). There are numerous physical, psychological and social benefits associated with HAI. For example, companion animals reduce individual risk of heart disease and improve recovery rates for those who have previously suffered from a heart attack (Creagan, Bauer, Thornley & Borg, 2015). Additionally, Hu et al., (2018) found a significant decrease in the psychological symptoms of dementia for patients treated with animal-assisted interventions. In older adults, companion animals have been found to offer significant social support that greatly impacts individuals' overall functioning and well-being. As demonstrated by Scheibeck, Pallauf, Stellwag, and Seeberger (2011), older adults with companion animals are better able to complete activities of daily living than their counterparts without pets, and experience reduced feelings of isolation and loneliness.

More generally, the therapeutic impact of HAI may be quantifiable through physiological means. Increases in serotonin, dopamine, prolactin and oxytocin have been recorded in individuals after petting animals (Creagan et al., 2015; Handlin et al., 2011; O'Haire, 2013). Handlin et al. (2011) noted such a phenomenon in their exploratory study, which called for collected blood samples from ten

individuals who were directed to pet, stroke, or talk to their dog for three minutes. The results of the study found a decrease in heart rate and Cortisol levels and an increase in oxytocin, none of which were found in the control group. Essentially, our brains send reward signals for petting animals; there is great potential for utilizing this in a therapeutic setting. The versatility of HAI as an intervention provides social workers with an adaptable tool that can be used in a variety of contexts.

The formal integration of HAI into the field of social work is not only warranted from a research standpoint but is supported by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics. The applicability of HAI to the values and ethical principles outlined by the NASW, specifically the value of *Importance of Human Relationships*, makes formal adoption an ethical imperative (NASW, 2008).

According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), *Importance of Human Relationships* is an inherent value of the profession. The ethical principle reads as follows:

Social workers understand that relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change. Social workers engage people as partners in the helping process. Social workers seek to strengthen relationships among people in a purposeful effort to promote, restore, maintain, and enhance the well-being of individuals, families, social groups, organizations, and communities. (p. 6)

Therefore, social work values explicitly emphasize that relationships among human beings are integral to change. It is the duty of social workers to promote relationships between humans on individual and institutional levels. HAI is a direct application of the value of the *Importance of Human Relationships* because animals can facilitate the development, enhancement, and restoration of relationships between humans (Fine, 2015). Gray

et al. (2015) emphasizes the beneficial role that pets play in their human companions' dating lives and, thus, the establishment of significant romantic relationships and families. Additionally, Hunter, Verreynne, Pachana, and Harpur (2018) notes the benefits of service animals in the workplace as not merely being restricted to their handlers, by also promoting greater socialization and increased rapport among employees. These studies are among those which highlight the ability of animals to act as bridges of connection in bolstering human relationships.

The unique relationship between humans and animals promotes emotional growth and overall well-being (Fine, 2015). Animals serve an important role in the well-being of humans. The relationships that humans have with their domesticated animals often involve the development of a deep emotional bond. In fact, the majority of pet owners in the United States consider their pets to be family members (AVMA, 2012). To dismiss the significance of an individual's relationship with their pet would be utterly irresponsible. Therefore, the definition of a 'human relationship' should be expanded within the NASW code of ethics to acknowledge the value that people hold for the relationships they have with their pets. If our profession wishes to respect the dignity of individuals, we are in no position to dismiss the value of human-animal relationships.

### **Micro Perspective**

In a direct practice setting, animals can serve as secondary therapeutic agents (Chandler, 2005). In this role, an animal can assist a social worker in connecting with a client by mirroring the client's affect and behavior. Mirroring occurs when an animal provides a physical reaction or response to a person's emotional state of action without verbal communication. The asset of mirroring is the integration of the animal's response as a talking point and opportunity for collaborative processing. Studies on equine therapy have shown that, because of their keen emotional intelligence, horses are particularly adept in mirroring clients. Additionally, these studies have noted the strengths of equine

therapy in creating opportunities for appropriate triangulation, which allows for advanced progress towards therapeutic goals (Wilkie et al., 2016). Furthermore, because animals are incapable of contradicting the attributes projected onto them, they serve as a nonjudgmental lens. Policay and Falconier (2018) found that therapy dogs utilized this nonjudgmental disposition to strengthen the therapeutic alliance and to facilitate connection among clients in couple and family therapy. Often, relationships between humans and animals develop more quickly than those between humans in a therapeutic setting, thus clients are more willing to discuss their concerns, frequently to the animal directly, and participate in interventions.

This process is also applicable to relational work outside of the clinician/client relationship. As transitional beings, animals can be utilized to assist social workers in helping clients re-establish trust in other human relationships. Barlow et al. (2012) observed that undergraduate students with self-reported childhood neglect noted attachment to companion animals as sources of support and healthy attachment into adulthood. Social workers can, thus, operationalize clients' relationships with pre-existing pets or therapy animals to support healthy attachment and renewed confidence between clients and other humans. These relational benefits can be seen in acute clinical settings as well. As demonstrated by Hoy-Gerlach & Wehman (2017), patients hospitalized for long-term psychiatric treatment displayed improved verbal, nonverbal and prosocial skills after visits with animals. Additionally, the prosocial effects of HAI have been found across various age ranges (Corson, Corson, Gwynne, & Arnold, 1975; Rone-Adams, Tapia, Rubin & Picard, 2015).

### **Macro Perspective**

On a more expansive level, policies and organizational systems may help facilitate the effectiveness of HAI and create protections for individuals who depend upon non-human animals to improve their quality of life. In the US, several steps have already been taken to protect owners

of assisting-animals. For example, under the Fair Housing Act, animals that provide assistance to individuals living with a disability are protected from housing limitations such as landlord-imposed animal restrictions (The Humane Society of the United States, n.d.).

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), service animals are protected as therapeutic aids and are allowed to accompany their owners in public places such as restaurants, airplanes, and hotels. While this law requires that service animals be trained to perform a specific job or task to support their owner, there is no federally-required certification for service animals. In contrast to service animals, emotional support animals are not federally protected under the ADA. Emotional support animals provide comfort to their owners, but without undergoing training to qualify them as service animals, they can be denied entry in public places and businesses. However, local and state laws vary regarding emotional support animals and their protections in public spaces.

Pet ownership serves as a strong facilitator for social connection and community building. For dog owners, dog parks act as a community hub providing a means for individuals to connect and form relationships. According to Wood et al. (2015), pet owners are significantly more likely to develop relationships with people in their neighborhood. It is common for people to strike up conversation when somebody is with their dog in public. These interactions can strengthen human bonds on a community level by helping people to establish relationships with those around them. Thus, on a local level, the implementation of animal-friendly recreation areas and dog parks can have a positive impact on the community.

Social workers comprehensively address the various systems within the lives of their clients. The human relationships formed through pet ownership are likely to serve as emotional supports in and of themselves. Relating to social work's Grand Challenges, HAI provides a framework for eradicating social isolation (American Academy of Social Work & Social Welfare, n.d.). Thus, the role

of domesticated animals in the lives of clients should be acknowledged and explored in a systematic and rigorous manner. In reflecting on the value of the *Importance of Human Relationships*, social work, led by NASW, must expand our understanding of how a relationship can be defined.

## **Social Work Education and Implications**

Although mainstream social work has been slow to integrate HAI as a part of the standard curriculum, several universities in the US have created classes for social work students teaching the value and practice of HAI. University of Denver, University of Tennessee, and Michigan State University have developed certificate programs for HAI encompassing knowledge from the fields of social work, veterinary medicine and psychology. In collaboration with its School of Social Work and the Animals and Society Institute, Arizona State University currently offers a Graduate Certificate in Treating Animal Abuse. The University of North Texas' Consortium for Animal Assisted Therapy, spearheaded Dr. Cynthia Chandler, offers an Animal Assisted Therapy course and weekend training opportunities, as well as research and community service initiatives ("Consortium," 2018).

Aside from certificate programs within schools of social work, a handful of universities are offering elective one and three credit courses (i.e. University of Toledo, Syracuse University, and Case Western Reserve University). It is also important to note that many universities offer the ability to take courses, complete certification programs, and even pursue graduate studies in HAI-related areas. The previously mentioned programs offer students and current professionals the ability to understand HAI through a social work lens. Due to the quickly expanding field of human-animal interaction, providing a comprehensive list of current educational opportunities is challenging. The aforementioned programs have been chosen due to their notable contributions to HAI education in social work, and provide a model for the curricula of future HAI courses with the understanding

that there is an abundance of untapped potential.

Inherent to the inclusion of HAI in mainstream social work practice is the proliferation of professional development opportunities for current social workers. Due to the general absence of HAI in mainstream social work education, the majority of those currently in the field may lack the training required to integrate HAI principles into their practice. While these certificate programs offer opportunities for professional development, such programs are sparse. Therefore, it is necessary that new training programs be developed to make such knowledge and training readily available to professionals.

Implications for clinical and other direct practice social work curricula are varied with a diverse range of context-specific practices that can be incorporated. For clinical-focusing social work concentrations, the general absence of animal-assisted intervention strategies in current curricula largely ignores the successful work that many clinicians are doing by integrating HAI into their practice (Becker et al., 2017; Chandler, 2005; Creagan et al., 2015; Hunt & Chizkov, 2014; O'Haire, 2013; Policay & Falconier, 2018; Rone-Adams et al., 2015). In addition to creating courses that focus specifically on HAI in social work, there are opportunities to embed related content across the curriculum. For example, in commonly offered courses such as those relating to death, grief, and loss, students should be taught how to address the grieving process for clients who have lost a pet. Current curricula touches on strategies for assisting clients with the loss of friends and family members, but fails to acknowledge the perceived importance of pets in some clients lives. For the majority of pet owners who consider their pets to be family members, pet loss serves as a significant hardship (AVMA, 2012). It is necessary that we acknowledge all important relationships in our clients lives and prepare social workers to meet clients where they are at, according to their individual needs and values.

Coursework focusing on developmental disorders such as autism would benefit from including intervention strategies which involve HAI

as a mechanism for facilitating client interaction (Becker et al., 2017; O'Haire, 2013). For example, specific strategies such as using a dog as a target for children to practice speech and prosocial behaviors can help prepare students to integrate these strategies into their practice. Additionally, social work students need to be educated on the policies and regulations related to assisting-animals such as therapy animals, service animals, and emotional support animals. If social workers are expected to have the capacity to write a letter of recommendation to clients in need of an assisting-animal, they must be educated to do so appropriately. Such information should be incorporated into the generalist curriculum, as social workers in a variety of contexts may be expected to perform these responsibilities.

While HAI-related interventions may not be a good fit for all clients, just as the use of animals may not be a good fit for all social workers, social work students should be taught about these strategies so they can make an informed choice on whether or not to utilize these techniques. If social workers are uninformed about a specific intervention strategy, they will not integrate it into their practice, regardless of its potential to improve client outcomes. On the other hand, as HAI research and practice grows, more social workers may choose to integrate HAI strategies into their practice. However, without having been taught to do so appropriately, there may be negative consequences to improper adoption of these techniques.

According to the Council on Social Work Education (2015), accredited social work education programs must teach a competency-based curriculum, with an emphasis on the core social work competencies. Competency 4 dictates that social workers must engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice. As previously noted, a growing body of research has found benefits associated with the integration of HAI in social work practice. We cannot continue to dismiss HAI research as nascent and inconclusive. It is time that mainstream social work acknowledges the potential value of HAI in certain contexts by integrating related content into accredited curricula.

The inclusion of HAI into mainstream social work practice and research carries with it the potential to bolster the field by attracting individuals who choose to pursue social work professionally based on their interest in HAI. Social workers and students may choose to specialize in veterinary social work while others may incorporate HAI into their more generalized practice. By expanding the field to include new areas of study and practice, growing opportunities for inter-professional collaboration will continue to broaden the scope of how social workers can support individuals and communities.

## **Conclusion**

We are actively calling on social work practitioners and educators to act in accordance with the following steps in order to integrate HAI into education, practice and advocacy. Concrete opportunities for action include:

- Expand current social work curriculum to offer coursework on HAI.
- Incorporate HAI and its relevant themes into existing core and elective coursework in social work education, such as courses on trauma-informed care, grief and loss, and micro and community practice.
- Proliferate the adoption of evidence-based practices from HAI research as recognized social work interventions
- Expand the definition of ‘relationships’ in the NASW Code of Ethics to include relationships with non-human animals.

While some clients may respond well to HAI, it is not a one-size fits all intervention. For example, those who are afraid of dogs would naturally not respond well to the presence of a therapy dog. Additionally, some clients may be allergic to certain animals, which limits the use of HAI with some individuals. While the use of fast-acting allergy medications and hypoallergenic animals can help overcome some barriers to the use of HAI, these are not perfect solutions. Like most evidence-based practices, HAI works for some, not

all. The field of social work excels at capitalizing on individual factors in a client’s life in order to provide assistance. This unwillingness to ‘stay in our own lane’ has helped to make social work such a valuable profession. The role of a social worker takes many forms, so why should the integration of animals in social work practice not be normalized? Research not only supports the value and role of animals in humans’ lives, but also their potential to be therapeutic agents in interventions. By heeding this call to action, social work practitioners, educators, and students can take concrete steps towards expanding *Importance of Human Relationships* to genuinely recognizing the importance of all relationships, regardless of species.

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