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Social Work and Human Animal Bonds and Benefits in Health Research: A Provincial Study

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Abstract

North Americans consider companion-animals as family members and increasingly as attachment figures. Across the health sciences and professions, substantial qualitative and mounting quantitative research provides evidence of health benefits of human animal interactions across the life cycle regarding diverse issues. In replicating a ground-breaking U.S. study designed to measure exposure to information and levels of knowledge and integration of human animal bonds (HAB) into practice, this present study, funded by the Nova Scotia Health Research Foundation, surveyed practitioners in Nova Scotia, Canada. Similar to the U.S. findings, this study revealed the majority of practitioners were uninformed about such benefits and about how they can be operationalized. As a result, the majority of practitioners in Nova Scotia are not including animals in practice, and notably, those who are, are doing so without the necessary education or training. The lack of preparation in human-animal interactions has serious implications for social work in that disparities and inequities between and among humans are related to the disparities between humans and other animals, society, and nature.

Keywords: human-animal interactions, human-animal bonds, critical social work, ecological social work, animal-assisted interventions (AAI), animal-assisted therapy (AAT), health research.

Substantial research across the health sciences and professions increasingly provides evidence of the human health benefits including physiological, psychological, emotional, and spiritual that can be derived from human-animal interactions (Barker, Rogers, Turner, Karpf, & Suthers-McCabe, 2003). From the 1960s onward there has been a considerable proliferation of research delineating the social contexts for understanding the interrelatedness of humans and animals and potential health benefits. The following abridged list demonstrates the breath this established area of research within the health disciplines: social work (Becker & French, 2004; Faver & Strand, 2003; Hanrahan, 2011; Netting, Wilson, & News, 1987; Risley-Curtiss, 2010; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006; Ryan, 2011; Sable, 1995; Zilney & Ziley, 2005); clinical psychology (Ascione, 1998, 2008; Ascione & Arkow, 1999; Lasher, 1998; Levinson, 1962, 1964, 1972; Walsh, 2009a, 2009b); medicine (Boat, 1995, 2010; Jennings, Reid, Christy, Jennings, Anderson, & Dart, 1998; Anderson, Reid, & Jennings, 1992; Friedmann & Katcher, 1978; Friedmann, Katcher, Lynch, & Thomas, 1980; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995; Katcher & Beck, 2010); psychiatry (Altschuler, 1999; Barak, Savoria, Mavashev, & Beni, 2001; Hart, Zasloff, & Benfatto, 1989; Katcher, 2010); nursing (Brodie & Biley, 1999; Friedmann, Son, & Tsai, 2010; Hooker, Holbrook Freeman, & Stewart, 2002; Johnson, Odendaal, & Meadows, 2002); and psychotherapy (Barker & Barker, 1988; Fine, 2010; Horowitz, 2010). Notably, much of this research represents recent inter-professional health collaborations, some of which are also strongly informed by trans-disciplinary perspectives, correlating to research from the humanities, the social, and natural sciences, collectively categorized as *Human Animal Studies* (HAS) or *Critical Animal Studies* (CAS), which explore the cultural and cross-cultural meanings of human-animal interactions in the lives of individuals, families, communities, and in the larger web of life. A groundswell of publications in the fields of HAS and CAS exploring the meanings of non-human animals in relation to humans and the shared global environment include a wide range of contributions from including sociology and anthropology (Arluke & Sanders, 2009; Flynn, 2000, 2008; Noske, 1989, 1997, 2008; Serpell, 1986, 2010); political and moral philosophy (Francione, 2009; Regan, 2004; Singer, 2009 [1975]); feminist and eco-feminist theory (Adams, 1994; Adams & Donovan, 2007, 1995; Besthorn, 2002; Glasser, 2011); law (Francione, 1995, 2000); ethics (Botes, 2000); veterinarian medicine (Arkow, 1998; Hart, 2000a, 2000b; 2010; Catanzaro, 2003; Rowan & Beck, 1994); biology and ethology (Bekoff, 2007; Wilson, 1984), and history of science (Haraway, 2003, 2008).

Western clinical perspectives on the health impacts of companion animals in the twentieth-century are traced to renowned child psychologist, Boris Levinson, who in the early 1960s inadvertently “pioneered the use of pets in therapy, [having] observed that a pet could be a lifeline for those who were especially vulnerable” (Walsh, 2009a, p. 469). In an historical overview of animal-assisted interventions, Serpell (2010) argues Levinson understood that “relations with animals played such a prominent role in human evolution that they have now become integral to our psychological well-being” (p. 27). While animal assisted activities (AAA) and therapies (AAT) are used today in some hospital critical care units, prisons, nursing homes and other long-term care facilities, psychiatric institutions, hospice facilities, and youth detention centers (Horowitz, 2010), such services are unevenly distributed across health care settings, and are often subject to the precariousness of operating budgets, and, in particular, to the vicissitudes of the individual personalities of clinical directors and other health programs/services management personnel. This may be because AAA and AAT have seldom been subjected to empirical research (Fine, 2010). Johnson, Odendaal, and Meadows (2002) underscore a need for

“empirical documentation...as a critical factor in widespread acceptance of animal-assisted activity” (p. 422). The call for more “outcome data” (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 423) in turn gives rise to several issues associated with conducting animal intervention research, such as, gaining access to clinical settings, institutional review board approval, and zoonotic concerns recruiting the sample (Johnson et al., 2002, p. 433).

Animal assisted interventions, however, comprise one particular focus on human animal interactions in relation to human welfare services, alongside others which highlight not only the pragmatics of our inter-dependence on shared eco-systems, but which also underscore broader epistemic and spiritual concerns intrinsically relevant to a holistic and sustainable approach to health. Other topics include the link between violence to animals and violence to people; grief and bereavement regarding animals and humans; the inter-connections between social and ecological injustices; and, ethical dilemmas and worldview conflicts in the health professions regarding animals. While the links between violence to humans and animal cruelty are well documented such connections have yet to translate into systemic practice and policy (Arkow, 2003; Arluke, Levin, Luke, & Ascione, 1999; Ascione, 1993; Boat, 1995). Research in and across clinical psychology (Horowitz, 2010; Walsh, 2009a, 2009b), family medicine (Barker & Barker, 1988; Boat, 2010; Friedmann et al., 2010; Friedmann & Thomas, 1995), gerontology (Barak et al., 2001), social work (Faver, 2009; Faver & Strand, 2003; Netting et al., 1987; Sable, 1995), and public health (Beck & Meyers, 1996), indicate how the unique interactions between humans and companion-animals contribute to good health across the life-cycle, psychological wellbeing, recovery from serious illness, and success in psychological and physiological therapeutic interventions aimed at prevention, as well as rehabilitation and education. Paradoxically, despite this growing body of research

there is a curious disconnect in the mental health field: animal-human bonds are unmentioned in most clinical training and research curricula despite the abundant evidence of their importance over the millennia, their centrality in contemporary lives, their therapeutic value in health and mental health research, and their deep meaning for human companions over the life course (Walsh, 2009a, p. 476).

Others in the helping professions have highlighted this *disconnect* in their research for decades. Pat Sable wrote in the journal, *Social Work* (1995), that

[d]espite findings suggesting that companion-animals contribute to physical, emotional, and social well-being...the social work literature has given little attention to the psychological role of pets...there is a lack of research or theoretical explanation of the dynamics of the human-animal bond (p. 335).

Beck and Katcher (2003) noted that due to a ground-breaking medical report by Friedmann and Katcher (1978) on the physiological health benefits of animal companionship, the National Institutes of Health (NIH) convened a workshop on such benefits 10 year later, where it was proposed by the NIH that:

All future studies of human health should consider the presence or absence of a pet in the home and...the nature of this relationship with the pet, as a significant variable. No future

study of human health should be considered comprehensive if the animals with which they share their lives are not included (as cited in Beck & Katcher, 2003, p. 80).

Indeed, North Americans increasingly consider companion-animals as family members (Flynn, 2000) and even attachment figures (Sable, 1995). The 2009/2010 National Pet Owners Survey, reported 62% of U.S. households have a companion-animal, equating to 71.4 million homes (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2013). In 2010, a survey of Canadian homes was conducted by Ipsos-Forward. They found that there are an estimated 8.5 million cats and 6.4 million dogs living in Canadian homes; 36% of Canadian households have at least one dog; while 37% have at least one cat (Canadian Animal Health Institute [CAHI], 2013). Nonetheless, “[s]ignificant support still eludes the field...large-scale scholarship on human-animal interactions still languishes, mainly because of lack of funding. Today...most grants to study human-animal interactions are for \$10,000 or less” (Rowan & Beck, 1994, p. 85).

Social Work Issues and The Human-Companion Animal Bond

Despite the extant research on human animal bonds and human health, there remain significant gaps in the literature on *how* the health professions, including social work, respond to practice issues. For example, within the field of homelessness and housing security, a core issue in public health and social welfare research, studies on homelessness and human-companion animal bonds (HCAB) (Cronley, Strand, Patterson, & Gwaltney, 2009; Kidd & Kidd, 1994; Labrecque & Walsh, 2011; Taylor, Williams, & Gray, 2004) are few (Labrecque & Walsh, 2011), and there is even less on *how* shelters for the homeless and in transition housing programs are responding to clients who bring companion-animals to their doors (Singer, Hart, & Zasloff, 1995). In their recent study, Labrecque and Walsh (2011) argue that of the five published studies to date, none “explore this issue within a Canadian context or from the perspectives of women living in homeless shelters” (p. 79). The pervasive disconnect between HCAB and homelessness research, policy, and service delivery, is problematic given that three of the five studies, according to Labrecque and Walsh (2011), “identify that homeless individuals’ attachments to their animals are stronger compared with the general population” (p. 83). Moreover, because “[v]ulnerable women who are homeless recognize the therapeutic value of companion animals,” Labrecque and Walsh suggest that “[h]omeless shelters should consider the need to provide space to accommodate the animal companions of homeless individuals” (p. 92).

Similarly, despite the prolific research correlating interpersonal violence and family dysfunction with child and adult animal cruelty (Arkow, 1998; Becker & French, 2004; Flynn, 2000; Long, Long, & Kulkarni, 2007), there is only one empirical study (known to this author) on service coordination between child welfare and animal protection agencies, investigating cross-sector training and reporting (see Zilney & Zilney, 2005). The inter-connections between interpersonal violence, animal cruelty, and the benefits of cross-sector reporting, have been suggested by Long, Long, and Kulkarni (2007), who argue how efforts to better understand violence and to operationalize interventions are hindered by the “widespread practice of categorizing violence” (p. 152), and the categorical “segregation of animal and human welfare groups...despite the historical emergence of child-saving institutions from animal protection societies” (p. 150-151). This disconnect ignores how animal cruelty is a known indicator of human violence, often concurrent with domestic violence (Faver & Strand, 2003), and as such, is

a serious public health issue. In addition to the advantages of an inclusive approach to violence in welfare service provision, others in social work have articulated how the anthropocentric worldview that informs the profession's dominant theoretical paradigms, limits a holistic response to the suffering of *all* of the inhabitants of shared eco-systems, as well as the scope of social work's current value base, code of ethics, and standards that directly inform education, training, and practice (Besthorn, 2000; Coates, 2003; Hanrahan, 2011; Mary, 2008; Ryan, 2011; Wolf, 2000). Fundamentally, to ignore animal cruelty is to ignore human violence. Ongoing disregard has a deleterious impact not only on the practitioner's ability to provide the best service to clients, but also for a sustainable healthy future for the planet (Besthorn, 2000; Coates, 2003; Mary, 2008).

Equally perplexing is the dearth of research on animal hoarding, a growing public health concern (Patronek, 1999) that appears to have fallen through the cracks. The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium (HARC), a U.S. based independent group of academic researchers, notes that "while animal care specialists recognize [animal hoarders] are in need of psychiatric help, almost no psychiatric literature exists on this topic" (The Hoarding of Animals Research Consortium [HARC], 2010). Animal hoarding, according to HARC, is about "satisfying a human need", and associated with other forms of violence, such as, elder abuse, child abuse, and self-neglect (HARC, 2010, "Home Page", para). Surprisingly, social workers and other front line mental health workers, who in a position to witness animals hoarding first hand, are not educated on the matter and are rarely involved in such cases. Ryan (2011) asserts that "social work folklore is replete with stories of animal neglect and/or abuse; it is often implicit in much casework experience, but infrequently made explicit" (p. 3-4). The prevalence of the non-engagement from human health service sectors in cases of animal hoarding and absence of protocol to address animal abuse that is present in cases of domestic violence, point to a disturbingly divisive practice premised on a system of values and beliefs that promote separateness and individual benefit. Consequently, social work's abiding reliance on the modern project demonstrates on a very practical level "what it is that social workers attend to and prioritize, and what it is that they ignore or relegate to relative unimportance" (Ryan, 2011, p. 3).

Such "co-dependence" (Mary, 2008) or "domestication" (Coates, 2003) of the social work profession contravenes contemporary health research that indicates how more people consider companion animals as significant attachment figures and are forming unique bonds, and the reality that companion animals inhabit extraordinary places in the lives of members of special populations, such as, the homeless, child and adult victims of abuse, and the elderly. We know little, however, about if or how health service providers are responding to such realities characterizing the lives of many services users. Needed are more empirical studies on human-animal bonds (HAB) focused on practice issues and on inter-professional health education.

Even where...concern for the animal is all too obviously *felt*, and deemed to be of *some* importance, there appears to be no guide or source of intra-discipline illumination to which social workers can refer in order to make an appropriate response, or engage in an appropriate moral reflection and judgment (Ryan, 2011, p. 3).

Risley-Curtiss' (2010) national U.S. study that surveyed what social workers know and are doing in the area of HAB was a ground-breaking attempt to address this obvious dilemma.

Premised on the notion that “companion animals should be integrated into social work research, education, and practice because of their interconnectedness with humans” (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 39), the study by Risley-Curtiss identified gaps in social work practice and education, revealing the majority of those surveyed *are not* including companion animals in their practice, and of those who are, are doing so without the appropriate education and training (p. 43). This present study replicates Risley-Curtiss’ innovative empirical investigation as a provincial pilot study in Nova Scotia, Canada. In applying a similar survey instrument, this study also aimed to gather information about social work practitioners’ degree of exposure, knowledge, and application of HAB theory to a range of social work issues.

Method

Sampling

A purposeful sample was drawn from the 2010-2011 Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers (NSASW) email membership list of 1,118 members who identified as clinical or direct practitioners with BSW, MSW, or Ph.D. degrees. Social workers were surveyed via *Opinio*, an on-line survey system hosted by Dalhousie University, Halifax, Canada, in November 2011. Initially intended to remain posted for two months, the survey was open for 11 weeks due to a low response rate. This study received institutional review board (IRB) approval through the Health Sciences Research Ethics Board at Dalhousie University’s office of research services. Recruitment was through email invitations through the NSASW’s listserv to 1,118 subscribers, a sub-sample of 1,707 registered social workers (Price-MacDonald & Associates Consulting Inc., 2009). As response rates were lower than desired, several occupational listservs were acquired through snowballing and used to advertise and promote the survey. It was surmised that some social workers respond to their work emails more readily than those from the professional association. One-hundred and seventy-four questionnaires were started, 26 surveys were false starts with no data generated, leaving 148 surveys with data. Of the 148 questionnaires with data, 129 were fully completed. Missing values on any particular question were relatively low. For this report, the results from the 148 respondents were used; the data presented excludes missing values. Against the sub-sample of registered social workers (RSWs), the 148 responses represent a 13% response rate.

Measures

The measures employed were the same as those in the original study: Exposure to information/knowledge of human animal relations; Inclusion of companion and other animals in assessment and treatment; Education and training; and, Demographics (for a detailed description of these categories, see Risley-Curtiss, 2010). Content validity of the original survey instrument was established through “a review of the literature and through a review by two international experts in the human-other animal bond field...[and through] a pilot test with a group of students” (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 41). Content validity was further established for this study through an ongoing literature review with a specific focus on finding and incorporating Canadian contributions to the study of social work, HAB, and the natural environment. Among the 38 questions, there were several specific open-ended questions, seeking qualitative depth, and one (question 38) that was a general open-ended question soliciting additional comments. Questions

8 and 9 asked respondents about their reasons for including and not including animals in practice; question 12 asked about any special training obtained for including animals in practice; and, question 15 asked about the theoretical base for respondents' treatment of animal abuse. Most of the questions were yes/no or multiple-choice.

Results

Descriptive statistics, such as, frequencies and means were used in these data analyses.

Sample Description

The sample population consisted of respondents who were 88% (n=131) female and 82% who identified as white (n=132). The mean average age was 47 years. A key interest in the sample demographics centered on possible bias in the kind of respondent who answered the questionnaire. The established demographic benchmarks found that most NSASW RSWs were female (81%) and a median age of 47 years for all members (Price-MacDonald & Associates Consulting Inc., 2009). Not enough information was available on race or ethnicity to establish a benchmark. Two indicators, urban-rural distribution and highest level of education obtained, showed more substantial variances from the benchmark. For this study, urban was defined as practice in the Halifax area, and rural was defined as everywhere else in the province. Sixty-six percent of study respondents practiced in Halifax (n=128), as compared to only 50% in the benchmark. An even stronger variance was evident in highest education completed with 63% of study respondents (n=132) having an MSW, versus 44% of the benchmark demographic. There is, therefore, some selection bias toward a more urban and higher educated respondent.

Two-thirds of the sample identified child protection, health, and mental health as major areas of practice. Seventy-five percent (n=131) identified their primary work function, with 94 respondents working in either clinical practice or direct practice (e.g. child protection), and 30 respondents working in administration or supervision/management. The primary client populations served by respondents (n=123) were non-elderly adults (36.6%, n=123) and families (30.9%, n= 123), with 15.5% reporting working with a mixed population, and the remainder with specialized populations (elderly, children, and adolescents).

The survey also allowed for sophisticated analysis of another dimension of the demographic: the respondent's interest in animals. It seemed possible that respondents would self-select to the extent that they were "animal-lovers". There are no benchmarks for the social work population as a whole, but it was possible to separate out those who are actively involved with human-animal considerations in intake and treatment, from those who are not, and measure those classes against a set of behavioural measures. The behavioural measures used were (a) whether the respondents currently have or had ever had a companion-animal, (b) whether they had made a financial donation to an animal protection or rights organization in the last year, and (c) whether they had volunteered at an animal shelter or rescue group in the last year. While there is a small positive effect from "animal lovers", the numbers were small enough so as not to introduce meaningful bias in the results.

Exposure to Information on Animals

Question one asked participants how much they had heard or read about the link between human violence and animal abuse; the positive influence of companion animals on humans; the treatment of clients who abuse animals; and who have experienced the loss of a companion animal. Respondents' exposure to information about the links to human violence ranged from *none* to *a lot*, unlike the U.S. study where the majority of those responding had heard or read *some/a lot* across all four questions in this category. Among those responding to the link with child abuse, 42.7% had read or heard *some*, 25.5% *a little*. Exposure to information regarding the link with domestic violence increased slightly with 43.1% of respondents having heard or read *some*, 20.6% *a lot*. Exposure rates dropped significantly regarding the link to elderly abuse with 46.2% having heard or read *nothing*, and 20.7% *a little*. Rates of exposure to information about the link to criminal behavior varied the most with 41.5% having heard or read *some*, 23.8% *a little*, and 24.5% *a lot*. In contrast, the majority of NS participants, as in the U.S. findings, had heard or read *some/a lot* about the positive impact of animals on adults (92%), children (84.9%), and elderly people (89.8%). Regarding exposure to treatment, again similar to the US findings, the majority of respondents had not heard much about treatment of clients who abuse animals (58.6% *none*, 26.2% *a little*). Regarding treatment for loss of companion animal, 33.6% respondents in this study had no exposure to information, with only slightly more at 35.6% *a little*, in contrast to the U.S. findings where most had heard about both forms of treatment.

Knowledge of the Human-Animal Bond

Question 22 asked respondents, using a five-point scale, to rank five the statements about humans and other animals, two of which were worded correctly and three incorrectly. For the purposes of analysis these categories were collapsed from five to three (*strongly disagree/disagree*; *agree/strongly agree*; *don't know*). Most participants (81.6%) correctly agreed or strongly agreed that "More than half of U.S. households have at least one dog or cat," whereas 11.8% *did not know* the correct response. Seventy-four percent did not know the correct response to the statement "One of the two least common fears of young children is of animals"; 25.7% correctly disagreed. Almost 80% of respondents disagreed correctly that "Bonds with companion animals are simply substitutes for human relationships." Even more respondents (93%) correctly agreed that "It has been demonstrated that people who repeatedly and intentionally harm animals are more likely to show violence towards people," and similarly 91.2% correctly disagreed that "The elderly are the population least likely to benefit from animals in their lives."

Animals in Assessment and Treatment

Sixty percent of respondents (n=148) related they do not include questions about companion or other animals in their intake assessments. Even more reported they do not include animals as part of their interventions in practice (70%, n = 147). Of those who do include questions about animals in their intake assessments (39.9%), 48 ask if their clients have companion-animals, 26 ask if they have other animals (e.g., farm animals), 17 ask if anyone in the family has hurt their animals, and 20 ask about what place the animals have in the client family. Responses reported in the "other" category had to do with animals who may pose a risk during home visits; client concerns regarding animal care during periods of hospitalizations or moves to long term care or

assisted living; and, who cares for a client's companion-animal.

Of the 44 respondents (29.9%, n=147) who reported including animals in their interventions, 6 employ animal-assisted activities, such as, visiting the elderly, 18 do animal-assisted therapy (i.e., animal is part of treatment plan), and 7 include animals in inpatient residences. Other responses had to do with encouraging clients to have companion-animals; disclosing to clients their own fears of an animal (e.g., dogs) to build rapport; recommending seeing-eye or a supportive guide dog for clients with severe anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder; assisting with care of client companion-animal; discussing the potential benefits of companion-animals; permitting clients to bring their companion animal to therapy; and playing with companion animals and clients outside. Of those respondents who answered the question (n=34) "what type of animals do you include in your practice?" dogs were the most common among 33.3% of respondents, followed by 24.4% identifying cats, and 13.3% citing horses. The remaining 29% of respondents reported working with other animals, including, birds, hamsters and guinea pigs, farm animals (e.g., goats, pigs, cows), and reptiles. Regarding the best reason for including other animals in interventions, of those who reported (n=136), 47% said animals provide a more holistic approach to practice; 27.9% said clients care about animals (emotional health); 16.9% thought animals help clients open up more (psychological health); while less than 1% said it was because clients need more exercise (physical health); and, the remaining respondents (7.4%) were not sure. The most common reasons given for not including animals in practice are: policy restrictions; lack of education and training; never considered it/not a priority/no perceived opportunities; confusion about the role of the animal; client allergies or fears; and, no access to therapy or companion-animals. Of those who responded (n = 138), 92.8% do not treat clients for animal abuse, while 63.7% reported they have or now treat clients for companion animal loss and grief.

Education and Training

Ninety-five percent (n=139) of respondents said they have not had any special training in including companion or other animals in practice. On the content of their social work courses, 51.7% reported they had no content regarding animals or did not remember such content. For respondents whose social work courses did include content about animals, 19.4% reported this information was on the positive effects of animals on people; 15% said it was about cruelty/abuse; and 13.9% on animal assisted activities or therapy. Sixty-seven percent (n=138) said they do not know of other social workers who include animals as part of intake or intervention. Eighty-eight percent, however, stated they want to know more about the human animal bond.

Limitations

The 13% response rate suggests that generalizability may be limited. There may be several reasons why people did not respond. In so far as it might be expected only those with an interest in animals would respond, the survey tested for this and no meaningful bias was introduced into the sample population. The single method of on-line distribution of the survey within a profession associated with high volume workloads and significant time constraints, however, may have been a key hindrance to the response rate. More to the point, it is estimated that the on-

line recruitment method *combined* with a generalized lack of awareness among practitioners in Nova Scotia about the ecological significance and overall benefits of HAB in social work, due to the absence of professional education and training opportunities and coordinated animal-assisted intervention resources and facilities in the province, may together explain the low response rate. Without ideological and structural work place support, and systemic policy, social work practitioners may not recognize the relevancy of HAB to individual, environmental, and public health issues. Future studies of this kind would benefit from using recruitment strategies that are directly integrated into professional development and other work related activities to off-set such limitations and deficiencies.

Discussion and Implications

This study investigated what social workers in Nova Scotia, Canada, know and are doing in the area of human animal bonds from the vantage point of practitioners. The results provide a preliminary profile of what respondents know about how different social work issues are informed by HAB, and how such understandings are operationalized in practice. Two key measures of active involvement with HAB in social work practice were used: whether respondents included questions about animals in their intake assessments, and whether they worked with or otherwise involved animals in their interventions. The findings revealed the constitution of these two measures of involvement as complex, revealing between them a lack of congruency. Some respondents are actively involved in one or the other of the two measures, and some with both. Remarkably, some practitioners who include animals in interventions do not include questions about animals in intake. Conversely, some who include questions about animals in intake do not include animals in treatment interventions. A small majority of respondents are involved in some intake and/or treatment, with 53% involved and 47% not involved. Of those involved, 32% were with intake, 24% just with treatment, and 44% were involved with both.

Despite the correlation between assessments and treatment plans, these distributions are not just a function of the different commitments to each of these activities, but also of the nature of involvement in any particular activity. For instance, 37% of respondents who conduct intake assessments ask whether the client has a companion animal, but only 13% ask whether anyone in the client's family has hurt their animals. Given the established links between animal cruelty and other forms of violence within family systems, questions about committing and/or witnessing animal cruelty should ineludibly, rather than optionally, follow once it has been determined a client shares a home or other living arrangement with a companion-animal. The omission of such questions is even more surprising as it appears that just under half of the all respondents have some exposure to and knowledge of the negative links to HCAB, such as, child abuse, domestic violence, and criminal activity.

Such practice discrepancies point out a "lack of preparation in human-companion animal relationships," (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 44) and social work's emphasis on diversity as anthropocentric and speciesist (Hanrahan, 2011; Wolf, 2000). On the micro level, education about human-companion animal relationships would increase practitioners' "ability to help" clients via practical assistance to individuals and families around appropriate and affordable companion-animal care (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p.44). On the broader social level, HCAB research

underscores the inherent structural barrier of social work's ontological foundations, highlighting the limits to helping clients from person-centered approaches. So long as the focus of *helping* remains exclusively on individualized approaches to *fitting* into the status quo, coping and adaption, personal change and growth to the detriment of the non-human inhabitants of our shared ecologies and related environmental issues, social workers will inevitably help fewer and fewer people. Unlimited human growth and affluence will result in ever-greater numbers of people being viewed, like most non-human animals now, as "resources for production, as commodities, not as members of a human or planetary community" (Coates, 2003, p. 36). Faced with such prospects, the integration of HCAB into social work is a postmodern imperative, a focus whose time has come, rather than a special interest. If social work "is to be truly anti-oppressive and ecologically grounded (which requires one to see humans in the context of their environments and as constantly in reciprocal interaction with significant others) (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p.44), the profession can no longer fail to consider the wellbeing of non-human others, and the overall health of the planet by integrating environmental issues and the acknowledging the connections between social and ecological injustices and crises (Coates, 2003).

The startling finding that among those few who are including animals in practice in Nova Scotia, like in the US, are doing so without the appropriate education and training, highlights the limited value base and ontological scope of mainstream social work theory and education in North America. In so far as social work aims to be inclusive and health education and research more generally is increasingly directed toward a trans-disciplinarily among the health professions, HAB research presents a portal through which these aims can be accomplished. As noted above, HAB research draws on a number of health professions and other disciplines and has produced important literature on a number of topics of relevance to social work such as intersecting forms of oppression (such as, racism, sexism, and speciesism), and the vital benefits and revealing contradictions in human animal interactions.

Although social work education is already struggling to be inclusive of many important social-environmental topics, the integration of nonhuman animals can be done with minimal effort and time... Simply modeling the inclusion of companion animals in genograms; in eco-mapping; and in definitions of family, support systems, and environment can raise awareness and legitimize the need to ask clients about companion animals. Identifying and using texts and articles that include companion animal issues (for example, see Ashford, LeCroy, Lortie, & Brougham, 2006) such as the link between animal cruelty and other forms of family violence and how to assess for other animal relationships, is critical for courses in human behavior, social work practice, families and children, domestic violence, and child welfare (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 44-45).

The study's finding that the majority of respondents in Nova Scotia who include animals in practice are doing so because they believe it to be a more holistic approach to practice, and because, like those in the US survey, most respondents want to know more about human-animal bonds, suggests the current historical moment is a propitious period in which HAB research could significantly transform the framework of social work theory and practice. In so far as the views of respondents are limited to the extent they interpret the nature of HAB related social work issues and the tasks they perform according to their own understandings, speaks directly to the need to expand social work's epistemic boundaries. For example, terms such as "animal-

assisted activity" and "animal-assisted therapy" were used interchangeably and variously misinterpreted, thus showing a lack of education about these concepts. Such discrepancies could easily be addressed by drawing on external resources for practice based information about animal-assisted interventions, such as the U.S. based Pet Partners, formerly known as the Delta Society (see Pet Partners, 2012, for distinguishing features of AAA and AAT). Moreover, as Risley-Curtiss (2010) and others have suggested, "given an increasing emphasis on evidence-based practice, this suggests that social work researchers should also join in efforts to evaluate such activities and programs" (p. 44).

The reasons participants gave for not including animals in practice, included policy restrictions, client and practitioner's allergies and fears, confusion about the role of the animal, and no access to therapy or companion-animals, illustrate "the lack of education and training about the benefits and various ways animals can be included in practice, a lack of understanding of the importance and usefulness of identifying animal cruelty in clients, and a lack of information on the vast numbers and types of agencies and organizations including animal facilitated work (Risley-Curtiss, 2010, p. 43). In Nova Scotia, as in most Canadian provinces, there exist several AAA/ATT services, most notably the St. John Ambulance Dog Therapy Program, that would extend the scope of options in client treatment planning if practitioners were informed and supported in making appropriate referrals. According to Risley-Curtiss (2010), "although not all practitioners need to do animal-assisted work, they should understand the potential benefits of and differences between animal-assisted activities and therapy and should consider referrals to programs that do include animals (for example, hippotherapy, equine-assisted psychotherapy)" (p.45).

The findings of this study, which are remarkably similar to those of the US survey apart from scale, suggest that despite some notable contributions discussed above, the lack of integration of HAB research into social work research and education has a number of significant implications for direct practice as well as for the future of social work. This study reveals three key findings: (a) a lack of congruency between assessment and treatment (i.e., active involvement of animals in intervention, for instance, and not in intake); (b) a degree confusion about basic approaches to interventions involving animals (e.g., the differences between activities and therapies); and, (c) concerning practitioners' perceptions, confusion about what HAB related issues are relevant to social work. The growing disparities and inequities between and among humans in our increasingly globalized world are related to the disparities between humans and animals, society and nature, the social and natural environments, and as such, social work theory, practice, research, and education can no longer overlook the intrinsic anthropocentrism of its theoretical foundations. An anti-oppressive and critical approach to social work must move beyond the idea of social work as a bounded discipline for "bounded beings" (Gergen, 2011). A *relational* understanding of clients (i.e., individuals and families), as well as service delivery, would enable practitioners to recognize, value, and even co-create meaning and capacity with individuals, families, and communities through existing and new relationships with the physical environment and with non-human others.

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