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Social work for all species: Dual consideration of social work ethics and the human-animal bond

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Abstract

The lives of social work clients can be greatly enhanced by relationships with non-human animals. This paper presents the viewpoint that recognition of the beneficial nature of the human-animal bond and support for clients who seek animal companionship is not only within the scope of ethical social work practice, but also an essential competency in contemporary social work practice. Using the six social work values of the *Code of Ethics* (service, social justice, importance of relationships, dignity and worth, integrity, and competence) to frame the discussion, the paper presents examples of each value in action as it applies to animal assisted interventions and to clients' relationships with their own pets. The authors introduce several real-world clinical examples supporting this viewpoint. Overall, the paper makes recommendations to social workers on how to practice ethically with regard to non-human animals and discusses steps to be taken within the field to promote these practices.

Keywords: Human-animal bond, social work ethics, companion animals, animal-assisted therapy

Introduction and Background

Social work practice continues to evolve in response to the needs of communities that social workers serve. Over the past several decades, pets have become a common part of family structure in the United States (American Veterinary Medical Association [AVMA], 2012). Moreover, social workers have incorporated therapy animals into their work in a variety of settings (Fine, 2015). The human-animal bond, a term that encompasses human relationships with non-human species as pets or in a therapeutic context, is credited with enhancing quality of life and decreasing a variety of physical and psychological symptoms for millions of Americans (Lem, Coe, Haley, Stone, & O'Grady, 2016; Ogechi, et al., 2016; Wood et al., 2017). This is particularly true for individuals who face social isolation or are otherwise marginalized. Because of the central importance that the human-animal bond plays in the lives and well-being of many individuals and families, social workers should be attuned to these relationships and

consider their potentially significant influence when working with clients. Furthermore, social workers should provide support for clients who seek to benefit from the companionship of non-human animals.

The social work *Code of Ethics*, originally published in 1960, has grown and changed over time to reflect the profession's evolution (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2017). While the *Code* does not currently reference relationships with non-human animals, the core values of service, social justice, importance of relationships, dignity and worth, integrity, and, competence can be interpreted to include the role of clients' companion animals and the benefits of social work interventions involving animals. Given the rising popularity of animal assisted interventions (AAI) and demographic trends in pet ownership, contemporary social workers may frequently come in contact with non-human animals in the course of their work (Evans & Gray, 2012). Dual consideration of social work ethics and the human-animal bond is therefore not only within the scope of social work practice but emerging as a timely and relevant competency in the field. Through case examples and discussion of relevant literature, this paper is meant to shed light on the potential applications of this dual consideration to clinical social work practice.

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Key Terminology and Statistics

According to the AVMA (2012), about 85 million United States households have a pet, and sixty-percent of pet owners consider these animals to be family members. Further study suggests that up to ninety-seven percent of pet owners include these animals in descriptions of their families (Risley-Curtiss, 2010). The importance of pets in the family structure is highlighted in the synonymous term, "companion animal," which is often used in literature pertaining to the human-animal bond (American Society for Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, 2018). Pet ownership is associated with a range of physical health and psychosocial benefits. Among adults without chronic health conditions, cat or dog ownership is correlated with a decreased risk of cardiovascular disease (Ogechi et al., 2016). Street-homeless youth with dogs have lower rates of clinical depression than their peers without dogs (Lem et al., 2016). Pet-owning residents in high-density urban areas are more likely to know their neighbors, an indicator of social cohesion, than residents without animals (Wood et al., 2017). These benefits underscore the potential importance of companion animals as an integral part of holistic treatment planning.

While not all clients on a social worker's case load benefit from or even enjoy spending time with animals, many clients' lives are enhanced immeasurably by the human-animal bond. Non-human animals play a wide range of formal roles in social work settings. In Animal Assisted Therapy (AAT), social work clinicians incorporate trained and certified animals in the course of goal-directed interventions. Examples include involvement of animals in psychotherapy, or in medical settings to increase patient engagement in physical or occupational therapy exercises (Abrahamson, Richards, Cline & O'Haire, 2016; Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017). Conversely, the term Animal Assisted Activities (AAA) refers to unstructured contact between clients and therapy animals. AAA are typically not directed by professionals and often are comprised of a volunteer handler bringing their certified therapy animal to visit hospital patients, or children in schools (Anderson & Olson, 2010; Ichitani & Cunha, 2016). AAI is an umbrella term that encompasses AAT and AAA, as well as interventions not fitting into either category, such as courthouse dog programs designed to provide emotional support to victims during testimony (Fine, 2015).

Methodology and Scope

This paper explores a dual consideration of ethical social work practice and the human-animal bond using the six core values of the *Code of Ethics* as a framework. Drawing from the existing literature on human animal interactions, the authors present relevant research findings and case studies from their own practice to illustrate ethical practice pertaining to clients' relationships with companion animals and the implementation of AAI. Throughout the paper, the *Code* is quoted and otherwise explicitly referenced. In some cases, the authors have re-worded phrases within the *Code* that use human-centered language. Most notably, the principle of *Importance of Human* Relationships has been presented as the principle of *Importance of Relationships*. While social workers' duty to ethically serve human clients is the primary focus, this paper discusses some principles of animal welfare. Consideration of human and animal well-being are not mutually exclusive in social work practice (Taylor, Fraser, Signal, & Prentice, 2016). In fact, practices that promote the welfare of clients' animals or therapy animals can benefit clients' overall well-being. A social worker can model appropriate self-care or relational norms and maximize the impact of the human-animal bond through promotion of interactions with healthy animals mutually able to benefit (Evans and Gray, 2012; Fine, 2015).

Social Work Value: Importance of Relationships

The *Code* recognizes that, "relationships between and among people are an important vehicle for change" and advises social workers to "engage people as partners in the helping process" (NASW, 2017). For many individuals, the relationship with an animal may stand in for or complement the benefits of human relationships. One of the authors (Karlovits) works as an in-home assessment clinician and once evaluated Anna[1], a four-year-old girl, to determine whether Anna would benefit from services addressing sensory integration issues and speech delays. Anna's mother Claire recently separated from her husband, and Claire and Anna moved to a town several hours away from friends and extended family. Claire became tearful while discussing the challenge of starting over and expressed guilt over the potential impact that these life changes might have on Anna. Just as the author was about to respond, Bella, the family mastiff, bounded into the room with Anna. Claire began to laugh and shared that spending time with Bella was, "like therapy" for her and Anna, and that spending time with Bella helped her to enjoy parenting and have optimism about the future.

Importance of Relationships and Clients' Companion Animals

The role that the family mastiff played in Anna's home life highlights the potential of human-animal relationships for facilitating human social support. Claire, for example, might make the acquaintance of other neighbors while walking Bella or taking Bella to the dog park; these acquaintances could develop into a social support network for her family. In fact, many individuals experiencing social isolation find that pets provide a feeling of connection that can positively impacts overall well-being (Bryant, 2008). For people coping with chronic and terminal illnesses, pets may also provide unconditional acceptance that their human companions, family, and friends may lack. In a study of men with AIDS, those who were closely attached to pets had significantly lower rates of depression than their counterparts without strong bonds to a companion animal; this increased adherence to medical directives which has potential implications for increased life expectancy (Siegel, Angulo, Detels, Wesch, & Mullen,

[1] Several case studies are discussed in this paper. All names and identifying information have been altered to preserve client confidentiality.

1999). For many individuals experiencing homelessness, pets provide comfort and emotional support, encourage responsibility, and can even facilitate interactions with others (Fine, 2015). A recent study on LGBT+ youth identified that many young adults *come out* as their identified sexual orientation or gender identity to their companion animals prior to their human family members (Jin, 2018). In each of these examples, the non-judgmental presence of trusted animal companions facilitated human social engagement and support.

Moreover, research on the physiological basis of the human-animal bond provides further support for the health benefits of spending time with companion animals. In a brief pre-test/post-test intervention study of play between dogs and owners, Odendaal and Meintjes (2003) found that the humans participants measured increased exogenous levels of the affiliative hormone oxytocin and the "feel good" hormone dopamine, and decreased levels of the stress hormone cortisol. These results are consistent with pet owners' reports that animals provide, "self-esteem, calmness, soothing, and acceptance" (Brown, 2007, as cited in Walsh, 2009, p. 469). Odendaal and Meintjes' (2003) study also found that the dogs measured increased levels of oxytocin and dopamine following playtime with their owners. This suggests there are mutually beneficial aspects of human-animal interactions. As stated previously, many pet owners consider their pets to be family members. Social workers might honor clients' potential relationships with animals by asking about pets during a general intake questionnaire that would also ask about human family members (Risley-Curtiss, 2010).

Importance of Relationships and AAT/AAI

All models of AAI build upon the benefits of human-animal interactions discussed above. Similar physiological benefits have been measured in human participants in both canine and equine assisted therapy. Preliminary evidence suggests that animal assisted treatment for symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), is associated with increased oxytocin levels, (Abrahamson et al., 2016). Higher levels of oxytocin, the neurotransmitter that modulates social behavior and physiological arousal, may facilitate decreased physiological PTSD symptoms including hypervigilance and heightened startle response (Yount, Ritchie, Laurent, Chumley & Olmert, 2013). The presence of an animal in therapy can also alleviate anxiety or physiological arousal associated with seeking help, allowing clients to feel safe and able to participate in an intervention (Hunt & Chizkov, 2014). If a client is reluctant to seek treatment and has positive relationships with animals, a social worker might consider referring the client to an appropriate AAI.

Social Work Value: Competence

Social workers are ethically bound to "develop and enhance their own areas of expertise" and advised to "practice within their areas of competence and consult and collaborate with professionals across disciplines as appropriate" (NASW, 2017). When social workers involve non-human animals in their work, they assume the ethical responsibility to understand the nuances of the intervention and ensure safety for both the client and animal (Fine, 2015). Equine assisted therapy has emerged as a promising modality for the primary or adjunctive treatment of behavioral health disorders (Hallberg, 2017). While some social workers may have competencies necessary to manage the equine components of the modality, some practitioners involve an equine professional to focus on the horse's needs and behaviors during the intervention (Zilcha-Mano, Mikulincer, & Shaver, 2011). Irrespective of whether the social work involves an equine professional, the decision to make accommodations for both client and animal well-being communicates that the social worker is practicing with their areas of expertise.

Competence and AAT/AAI

The act of a social work clinician partnering with an equine professional to ensure high quality service could communicate that the clinician is committed to practicing within their areas of expertise and open to collaborating with other professionals to meet client needs. Social workers can develop competence in working directly with animals, or in implementing AAI through continuing education programs. At the time of this writing, two University-based schools of social work offer comprehensive certificate programs addressing the social work role in human-animal interactions. The Graduate School of Social Work at University of Denver houses the Institute for Human-Animal Connection (IHAC). Through IHAC, social workers and students can pursue certificates in Animal Assisted Social Work and Equine-Assisted Mental Health. IHAC also hosts professional conferences and IHAC faculty maintain active research agendas related to human-animal interactions (Institute for Human-Animal Connections, 2018).

Similarly, at the University of Tennessee-Knoxville, the Schools of Veterinary Medicine and Social Work host an interdisciplinary certificate program in Veterinary Social Work. Students can take courses towards this certificate during or after their MSW program, and develop competencies in AAI, the link between human and animal violence, animal-related grief and bereavement, and compassion fatigue (Veterinary Social Work, 2017). Both programs can be completed while one is a current MSW student or after graduation for continuing education credits. The online format of both programs' post-graduate options enhances the accessibility of high-quality social work education.

Social workers wishing to involve their own animals in practice settings must first identify the kind of work for which their animal might be best suited. Traditional notions of a 'therapy animal' might be a friendly visiting program in a hospital. Programs employing such animals exist in a wide range of medical settings and have been associated with decreased chronic physical pain and increased reported mood in patients (Coakley & Mahoney, 2009; Ichitani & Cunha, 2016; Kaminski, Pellino, & Wish, 2002). In order to participate in visiting programs in hospitals or other facilities, animals (most commonly dogs) typically require certification from one of the many accrediting bodies including Pet Partners, Therapy Dogs International, and a wide range of locally operated therapy animal organizations. Certification is achieved by examination; animals must pass obedience tests and demonstrate familiarity with scenarios that might be common in the line of therapy work (Pet Partners, 2014; Therapy Dogs International, 2018).

Non-hospital settings, such as schools, nursing homes, and libraries often also require certification, which can often be obtained from the same organizations that certify animals for hospital visiting programs (Anderson & Olson, 2010; Kirnan, Siminerio, & Wong, 2016). In a clinical practice setting, therapy animals play a different role and might be required to be more interactive with clients and respond to emotional cues (Chandler, 2005). Social workers must be aware of their animal's temperament and the settings in which the animal might best meet the needs of clients. For instance, animals suited for hospital visiting programs might not be appropriate in a library reading program. Here, part of the social worker's duty of competence is to determine an appropriate role for their animal based on the animal's temperament, strengths, and comfort level (Howie, 2015; Vanfleet & Faa-Thompson, 2017). Consultation with an animal behaviorist can be an important tool for social workers during the process of determining what role, if any, their animal might play in social work practice.

Competence and Clients' Companion Animals

Clients may ask social workers for advice regarding pet care and training, particularly if the social worker involves an animal in their practice. Social workers should be mindful of remaining within the bounds of their professional roles. While social workers might discuss the relationships that clients have with their pets, or even discuss the training approaches, social workers should refer questions in the scope of veterinary medicine or animal behaviorism to the appropriate professionals. The training programs referenced earlier emphasize the importance of establishing interdisciplinary connections between social work and animal serving professionals (Institute for Human-Animal Connections, 2018; Veterinary Social Work, 2017). To support clients while also remaining within the bounds of professional competencies, social workers might consider creating a list of local resources for distribution including free and low cost veterinary care, animal training, and animal rescue organizations.

Social Work Value: Service

To meet the needs of clients, social workers, "elevate service to others above [their own] self-interest" and to "draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need" (NASW, 2017). Client needs must take precedence in any social work intervention, including those involving animals. Self-disclosure about companion animals, for example, has the potential to enhance client outcomes, but should be used intentionally for this purpose. One of the authors (Cabral) works in a program that empowers aging out foster youth to develop job skills through internships and volunteer work at local animal shelters. Part of her role is to support participants in managing frustration and difficult emotions elicited by the tedious or unpleasant components of shelter work. She adopted her own dog from a shelter and often refers the ways that rescue organizations and their volunteers saved her dog's life. This form of self-disclosure helps program participants to re-frame their own role in the larger context of animal rescue, ultimately supporting participants' development of coping skills to manage stress and tolerate frustration in the workplace. Here, the author draws on personal experience and knowledge to benefit clients' overall development and well-being.

Service and AAT/AAI

Social workers can ensure that animals are only involved in client work if involvement benefits the client. A social worker should not implement AAI out of self-interest, for example, if the social worker lacks pet care during a long shift and brings their animal into the work setting in place of paying a pet sitter. Successful implementation of AAI requires a clinician to be familiar with the benefits of the human-animal bond, and to have a strong understanding of how to integrate animals into the therapeutic setting (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017). The social worker should use this knowledge to ensure that the use of an animal in the intervention is appropriate for the client. Likewise, a social worker should not provide AAI to a client who would not benefit from or does not wish to participate in this form of intervention. During the intake process, the social worker should first determine whether AAI is appropriate for and desired by the client. A social worker might assess the importance of animals or pets in the life of the client and ask about for any past negative experiences with or allergies to animals which might preclude the client from safe participation in AAI (Kaminski, et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the social worker should ensure that the animals involved in the therapeutic setting are certified and screened by an organization that specializes in evaluating animals to safely participate in AAI (Coakley & Mahoney, 2009). Best practices for screening an animal for participation in AAI include

certification by an accrediting body and additional testing for animal temperament. When applicable, the social worker's ongoing communication with their coworkers is necessary to ensure that the AAI is not disruptive to other services being provided in proximity to the AAI (Abrahamson et al., 2016). For example, an outpatient social worker might notify coworkers of days that the therapy animal is scheduled to be present; this would allow other social workers to notify phobic or allergic clients to avoid scheduling appointments on those days.

Service and Clients' Companion Animals

The bond between humans and their companion animals is powerful and social workers can serve clients by acknowledging the importance of their pets and applying the same values and skills towards the relationship that they might employ when working with human members of a client's family (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006). A social worker can fulfill the value of service through empowering clients to properly care for their pets. Programs exist that increase the likelihood of appropriate pet care for individuals with barriers to appropriate veterinary care. The shelter medicine program at The University of Pennsylvania School of Veterinary Medicine, for example, trains veterinary students to serve low-income communities surrounding the University through education about basic animal care and promotion of preventative veterinary medicine. The goal is to prevent relinquishment of pets to shelters in response to treatable behavioral and health issues (Penn Vet, 2018). While not explicitly a social work program, the shelter medicine program exemplifies the value of social work service as it assists vulnerable individuals in maintaining ownership of their pets and, therefore, continuing to reap the benefits of the human-animal bond.

Social Work Value: Social Justice

Social justice is at the heart of social work practice; social workers are beholden to "pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people" (NASW, 2017). There are many programs that tap into the human-animal bond to empower marginalized individuals progress towards independence. In the prison-based New Leash on Life program inmates learn dog training and handling skills and prepare the dogs to be adopted to new families or become service animals (New Leash on Life USA, 2018). The program is mutually beneficial. The dogs, who often were at risk of euthanasia, benefit from round-the-clock contact with a devoted caregiver who is becoming proficient in reading and responding to canine body language. Inmates develop skills in dog training that could be transferable to post-incarceration employment and forming emotionally beneficial relationships with dogs (Strimple, 2003).

Social Justice and AAT/AAI

The New Leash on Life program is a powerful example of an AAI that has short and long-term benefits for participants. It exemplifies the core value of social justice and has been successful in its approach to support inmates preparing for re-entry. Social workers may promote social justice by implementing AAI in work with clients who may be unable to have a pet due to socioeconomic status, disability or other form of disenfranchisement (Evans & Gray, 2012). AAI has been implemented in settings including psychiatric hospitals, juvenile justice centers, and domestic violence shelters (Chandler, 2005; Fine, 2015). This allows clients to benefit from the human-animal bond when pet ownership may not be possible or when an individual may be temporarily separated from their pet.

Additionally, social workers might also work to alleviate barriers to accessing AAI. As discussed previously, equine assisted therapy is a promising treatment for a wide range of physical and psychological health conditions (Hallberg, 2017). Because horses require specialized environments such as riding centers or farms, equine therapy programs tend to be located in rural areas, thus limiting access to clients in urban areas, and services may be costly and not covered by standard health insurance (Buck, Bean, & de Marco, 2017). To support marginalized client populations that might benefit from this modality, agency-based social workers could apply for grants to offer equine therapy as an adjunct to regular services, or advocate for program funders and donors to cover some of the costs associated with the modality, including those for transportation.

Social Justice and Clients' Companion Animals

Another importance component of social justice is, "promoting sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity" (NASW, 2017) With regards to clients' pets, social workers can express respect and appreciation for clients' differing cultural attitudes towards animals. While the human-animal bond is documented across cultures, clients might have strong and culturally-informed opinions about animal care and training, and the roles that animals are expected to play (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006). These opinions may differ greatly from the social worker's. One of the authors (Wenocur) previously worked in a family homeless shelter and integrated trained therapy dogs into the work. Many families living in the shelter shared their experiences of having dogs for the purpose of protecting their family from harm and expressed surprise when the author shared that her dog was not in a position to provide any protection for her.

Just as social workers should honor the diversity of family structure in their clients, social workers should not presume clients' relationships with animals to mirror their own. An exploratory study found that there were differences based on race and ethnicity in people's attitudes toward the importance of spaying and neutering pets, providing regular veterinary care, and declawing cats (Risley-Curtiss, et al., 2006). Individual and cultural differences can be a delicate issue to address with clients. Social workers are encouraged to maintain a stance of curiosity and openness when learning about different cultures, but also to promote justice for vulnerable populations such as the animals that we encounter in the field. While some people maintain an attitude of dominance toward animals, social workers have an opportunity to open discussion with clients about the greater value of animals (Hyers, 2015).

Social Work Value: Dignity and Worth

Social workers must approach relationships with clients, "in a respectful fashion" and to be, "mindful of individual differences" that impact clients' behavior and overall functioning (NASW, 2017). This is particularly important when working with marginalized populations, including individuals who may be isolated. Early in her career, the one of the authors (Wenocur) was a case manager in a public nursing facility. Many of the residents had lived there for years, and lived with debilitating conditions including traumatic brain injury, late-stage Huntington's disease, and advanced dementia. Visitors were infrequent, and most residents lacked social connections to the outside world. There were, however, several facility cats that roamed the halls freely. Some residents found immense comfort in spending time with the cats and would describe the cats as their friends or loved ones. Some higher functioning residents assisted in the care of the cats and would proudly discuss their contributions to the cats' well-being.

Dignity and Worth and AAT/AAI

Interactions with the cats provided the nursing home residents with much needed social engagement, and evoked joy and a sense of purpose among the residents. This is a particularly impactful intervention for clients who may be socially isolated (Bryant, 2008). Through the introduction of the onsite cats, the nursing home facilitated recognition of individual clients' dignity and worth. Social workers are also called upon to remain, "cognizant of the dual responsibility to clients and the broader society," which may include taking steps to support programs that promote dignity and worth of the person (NASW, 2017). On a macro level, social workers might advocate for legislation that broadens the reach of these modalities through programmatic and research funding support. Inspired by the impact of therapy dogs on students healing from the trauma of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting, the state of Connecticut passed a bill that provided organizational structure and funding for therapy dogs to be deployed to areas impacted by large scale tragedy (An Act Concerning Animal Assisted Therapy, 2013). At the federal level, there has been at least one request for applications for funding exploratory demonstration projects on the efficacy of AAI (Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). In the long term, social workers can fulfill the dual responsibility to clients and broader society through promotion of such legislation, particularly if the legislation results in expansion of AAI and AAT to isolation or otherwise marginalized individuals.

Dignity and Worth and Clients' Companion Animals

Social workers might also express respect for the dignity and worth of the person through, "promoting clients' socially responsible self-determination" (NASW, 2017). Opportunities for social workers to promote the dignity and worth of clients in this manner may arise frequently, especially for clinicians who provide services in clients' homes and witness interactions between clients and their pets. As previously discussed, social workers should be mindful of cultural differences that might impact treatment of pets and should not provide advice outside the scope of social work expertise. However, social workers can support clients to make informed decisions about pet care through provision of reading materials and other resources. The cellphone application "Dog Decoder" (Breitner, 2015) costs only a few dollars and includes cartoons delineating the subtleties of dog body language. This resource enhances clients' abilities to respond to dog communication patterns and promotes mutual respect and enjoyment in the human-animal bond. Similarly, children's books such as, "Tails are Not for Pulling" by Elizabeth Verdick (2005) might assist families with children in setting limits around interactions with animals and empower children to recognize the impact that their behavior may have on their dog's well-being.

Social Work Value: Integrity

In social work practice, integrity is defined as the, "responsibility that social workers have to behave in a trustworthy manner" and includes "maintaining an awareness of profession's ethical standards and practices and promoting these [practices] within [professional] organizations" (NASW, 2017). A social worker might demonstrate integrity to clients through honest recognition of and response to an animal's expression of their needs. In turn, this communicates to clients that the social worker in capable of acknowledging and responding to client needs. One of the authors (Cabral) has a dog named Raina who is certified as a therapy dog. While volunteering at Children's Hospital of Philadelphia (CHOP), the author recognized that CHOP was not the best fit for Raina based on the dog's body language. Raina was far too playful and rambunctious around children, which was inconsistent with the hospital's expectation that therapy dogs remain calm and under the control of the handler. The author

knew that Raina was more relaxed around older adults and began to bring Raina to visit nursing homes and adult hospital populations. Raina quickly became a welcome, anticipated visitor in the nursing home, and displayed excited and joyful body language when visiting.

Integrity and AAT/AAI

Although the author had been excited to volunteer at CHOP, Raina's temperament was better suited for work with adult clients. Involving Raina, a dog who showed visible discomfort during her visit, would have been a disservice to the patients at CHOP. Conversely, bringing Raina to a nursing home set up the dog for success, and nursing home residents benefitted from the presence of a therapy dog that was appropriately suited for the work environment. Overall, social workers who bring their own animals into practice settings have a duty to act with integrity towards their clients, as well as towards their therapy animals (Howie, 2015). For example, one of the authors (Wenocur) informs clients that they are welcome to request evidence of her therapy dog's vaccination records. Clients are entitled to a clean and safe environment that fosters a trusting relationship with their social worker (NASW, 2017). Therapy animals are an extension of that environment and as such should remain up to date on preventative veterinary care and basic hygiene. Specific therapy animal certification programs have guidelines regarding animal hygiene and the management of allergens (Pet Partners, 2014; Therapy Dogs International, 2018).

Social workers that involve ill-prepared animals in social work interventions open themselves to legal liability for professional malpractice. Reamer (2003) cautions that social workers who present themselves as specialists in a particular area will legally be held to the standards of a specialist, even if their claims of specialization misrepresent their actual level of expertise. The training, supervision, and ongoing consultation required to successfully and ethically implement AAT renders a social worker a specialist in this area of practice (Bachi & Parish-Plass, 2017; Howie, 2015). Therefore, if a social worker violates ethical codes of conduct while falsely presenting themselves as an AAT practitioner, they risk professional censure and even legal recourse (Reamer, 2003).

Integrity and Clients' Companion Animals

Transparency and honest communication are important components of integrity in social work practice. Previous sections have discussed potential appropriate responses to concerns about the health and safety of clients' pets including the provision of resource materials. Social workers can also model open communication about human animal interactions and empower clients to consider and express their own needs. For example, one of the authors (Karlovits) has some allergies to hair and dander and, during the course of a home visit, began to have an allergic reaction to a client's cat. The author acknowledged the potential disruption to the assessment she was conducting and requested that the client and she find an outdoor area to continue their conversation. Social workers might also promote honest communication with clients who wish to adopt a pet. A social worker might explore with their clients' what kind of pet, if any, might fit with the client's lifestyle. A social worker might also support the client in determining whether pet ownership is appropriate. If the client does not adopt a pet, but still seeks the benefits of spending time with animals, the therapist might support the client in finding an appropriate venue. This might include volunteering at an animal shelter or benefiting from the presence of a therapy dog.

Conclusion

Not all clients will have pets or want to participate in AAI. In fact, some clients may be allergic to or have fears of the animals commonly involved in interventions. Similarly, not all social workers will choose to implement AAI. Some social workers may experience fears or allergies, or they may not want to take on the responsibilities associated with AAI. Social workers should, however, support clients who seek to benefit from human-animal relationships. It is an ethical imperative for social workers to remain within the bounds of their professional practice while supporting and empowering the populations they serve. As the benefits of human-animal relationships become more understood in the literature, social workers have a responsibility to acknowledge and support the roles animals play in the lives of their clients.

Non-human animals continue to shape and enhance the worlds of families and individuals. Social workers have a duty to honor these relationships in an ethically-informed manner. Applications of the ethical principles discussed in this article represent a small percentage of the potential manifestations of these principles. Within the social work field, ongoing collaboration between professionals well-versed in the human animal bond is required. The American Counseling Association has developed a Standard of Competencies for professional counselors implementing AAT (Stewart, Chang, Parker, & Grubbs, 2016). Because the social work scope of practice extends beyond therapy and counseling, it would benefit the profession, and all those served by the profession, to adopt a formal code of ethics that incorporates the human-animal bond. Such a document would provide clear guidance to social workers grappling with ethical issues related to non-human animals and enhance overall capacity to meet client needs.

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