Integrating Animal Content in Social Work Curricula: An Increasing Imperative

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Goals

- Look at this history of animals in social work practice
- Discuss the importance of including content on the human-animal dynamic into social work curricula
  - Including, the risks associated with not doing so
- Share and generate ideas about how this can be done in our programs

History

- The human-animal bond is longstanding
- Earliest indication of the significance of the human-animal relationship in 20,000 year-old cave wall paintings of Cro-Magnon people
- Often characterized as a spiritual bond
- Some have argued that human and dogs have co-evolved (Wang et al., 2013)

A Gap

- In 2012, the AVMA estimated 70 million dogs, 74 million cats, 3.7 millions birds, 1.8 million horses
- Among practitioners
  - A recognition of the importance of including animals in assessment and treatment
  - A desire to seek non-traditional treatment options for people who are not finding success with conventional interventions
- Practicing social workers report using animals in some way in their work (approx 25%)
  - And, yet, the vast majority of practicing social workers received no animal-related content or training during their coursework (Risley-Curtiss, 2010)
- This represents an important gap that we need to fill

Relevant Knowledge and Training

- The therapeutic and evidence-based impacts that animals have on human behavior, health and wellbeing
- The impact of pet loss and grief on owner wellbeing
- The clear link between animal and human violence
- A new clinical understanding of animal hoarding

HAB

- The bond between humans and animals can be used to assist the therapeutic process
  - Animal-Assisted Therapy (AAT) has been shown to enhance client's sense of touch and allows for projection of attachment in a safe, approachable setting (Parish-Plass, 2008)
  - Studies show improvement of social interactions and mood, measured reduction of stress in relation to cortisol level, heart rate, and blood pressure, less fear and anxiety, improvement of mental and physical health (Beetz, Uvnäs-Moberg, Julius & Kotrschal, 2012)

Pet Loss & Grief

- The strength of the HAB also correlated with the experience of grief and loss after a pet's death
- Nearly all of pet owners identify their pet as a family member (Cohen, 2002)
- Pet loss can decrease socialization and increase the likelihood of depression (King & Werner, 2011)

Link Between Human & Animal Violence

- Violence against animals is linked to violence against humans
  - Violence against animals and intimate partner violence occur disproportionately in the same households (McPhedran, 2009)
  - Survivors of intimate partner violence also experience violence toward their pets, with perpetrators of IPV likely to have a history of threatened of actual pet abuse (Walton-Moss, Manganello, Frye & Campbell, 2005)
- Violence in childhood associated with violence in adulthood
  - Childhood violence against animals may be first indicator of Conduct Disorder (Ascione, 2001)
- Violence against animals is prevalent enough to warrant a change in the the FBI's 2016 Uniform Crime Report – will include 4 types of animal cruelty

Animal Hoarding

- Associated with substantial mental health challenges, an array of complex needs, and extremely high recidivism rate without a research base to support effective treatments and interventions (Frost, Patronek & et al., 2011)
- Removing animals and mandating cleaning of homes does not address ease of access to animals in the future (Steketee, Gibson, Frost, Alabiso, Arluke & Patronek, 2011)
- 100% recidivism without clinical intervention; removal of animals is not a sufficient response
- Hoarding is separate from OCD in DSM V and has an "animal type"

Risks of NOT including this content

- Missing important relationships that could inform an assessment
- Intentionally or unintentionally shaming clients who treat pets as family
- Not utilizing existing supports - pets - to support recovery and stability
- Being unprepared to support victims of domestic violence without an understanding of the potential for violence against companion animals
- Underappreciating the risks that humans face when living in neighborhoods with dog fighting
- Failing to fully support individuals when a pet dies
- Believing that removing animals from a hoarder is a valid approach

Curricular Opportunities

- Include content on the human-animal dynamic when:
  - Discussing the process of comprehensive assessment
    - "Do you or does anyone in your family have relationships with animals?"
  - Teaching family systems - animals may be family members, critical to a full understanding of the family system
  - Teaching attachment theory: HAB, violence and hoarding
  - Teaching life course development – childhood attachments to/violence against pets and older adult reluctance to leave pets for needed care
  - Teaching grief and loss
  - Teaching cultural humility
    - Animals have different roles and meanings in different cultural, ethnic, racial and geographic settings – companion animals, livestock, protection, food

Cont'd

- Modify assignments to require inclusion of animals when present in case material
  - Biopsychosocial assessments
  - Genogram
  - Case presentations
- Encourage students to:
  - Leverage existing bonds with animals to support social work interventions
  - Consider incorporating animals
  - Advocate for inclusion of questions related to animals on intake forms at placements
  - Include animals, where appropriate, in treatment plans
  - Consider research projects that support the collection of evidence in animal-assisted programs

Cont'd

- Safety
  - Students need to be taught how to manage home visits and client situations that involve animals
    - Recommendation to request that animals be restrained before entering a home
    - Need to learn how to do this while building rapport and trust
- Self-determination
  - Love of animals is not universal; resist assumptions and avoid shaming when clients reveal a dislike of animals
  - Animal attacks against humans can cause significant PTSD; ideally, this is learned in a comprehensive assessment process

Field Placements

- Pet loss and grief programs
- Therapeutic riding: PTSD, Autism, TBI
- Therapy dogs in schools, hospitals, older adult homes
- Service animal programs: physical, psychiatric
- Courtroom companion programs
- Inmate canine training programs
- Adoption programs for veterans
- Suicide prevention for veterinary students

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