Social Work Practitioners and the Human–Companion Animal Bond: A National Study

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Extensive research documents powerful relationships between humans and companion animals, and 62 percent of U.S. households report having a companion animal. Social workers are likely to work with individuals and families with companion animals; thus, the inclusion of such animals in both practice and research as a natural extension of social work with humans, and their challenges, coping mechanisms, and resiliency factors, seems called for. Yet there is little in the social work literature that identifies what social workers are doing in this area. Thus, this descriptive study sought to explore nationally what social work practitioners know and are doing in the area of the human and companion animal relationships. Findings include that social work practitioners appear to have basic knowledge of the negative and positive relationships between humans and companion animals. About one-third are including questions about companion and other animals in their intake assessments, and a little less than 25 percent are including companion and other animals in their intervention practice. The vast majority have had no special training or coursework to do so. Implications for these and other findings are discussed, and recommendations for social work research, education, and practice are offered.

KEY WORDS: *animal-assisted therapy; companion animals; human–animal bond; pet therapy; social work practice*

A growing body of research supports the powerful relationships between humans and companion and other animals: both positive and negative. Companion animals may assist children and adults in feeling a sense of security and unconditional love (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank, et al., 2006), contribute to a child's cognitive and language development (Melson, 2001), and contribute to an elderly person's ability to carry out daily activities (Raina, Waltner-Toews, Bonnett, Woodward, & Abernathy, 1999). Service animals enhance independence and quality of life for children and adults who have ambulatory and other kinds of challenges (Duncan & Allen, 2000). Companion animals, however, are also victims of human cruelty, and there is growing evidence of a link between animal cruelty, child maltreatment, domestic violence, and increased criminality (Ascione, 2005).

Evidence of the powerful relationships between humans and companion animals, as well as the fact that the majority of people with such animals consider them to be part of their family, supports the premise that the social work profession should be informed about these relationships and skilled in including companion animals in their practice. A review of the social work literature, including major textbooks, and experience in social work education and practice indicates that companion animals have not traditionally been included as significant others in clients' environments. Recent related research further suggests that integration of companion animals into current social work may not be happening. A study of cross-reporting between child welfare workers and humane society workers found that a number of child welfare workers thought cross-reporting was unimportant, were resistant to including animal welfare in their assessments, and underreported concern for animal well-being (Zilney & Zilney, 2005). Risley-Curtiss (2004) found that only seven out of 230 schools of social work that responded to a survey included much content on the human–companion animal bond (HCAB) in their courses and that what was offered was mostly about animal-assisted therapy. Finally, Ascione (2005) asserted that "developmental psychology and related disciplines have virtually ignored the positive role that pets and other animals may play in the lives of children" (p. 5). Social work is one such related discipline. The purpose of this study

is to examine what social work practitioners know about the HCAB and whether they are including such relationships in their practice.

SOCIAL WORK AND COMPANION ANIMALS

Companion animals should be integrated into social work research, education, and practice because of their interconnectedness with humans. This interrelatedness plays out three ways that are essential for the social work profession include: (1) Companion animals are usually considered to be family members and, thus, part of family systems; (2) animal cruelty by children or adults is very deviant behavior that is commonly correlated with a dysfunctional home life, indicates a need for mental health services, and is related to many forms of human oppression (for example, violence against women and children); and (3) companion animals can have a therapeutic impact on the functioning of people of all ages. Although these areas are discussed in the next sections, they are not discrete categories but are very much intertwined. For example, abused children may be more likely than nonabused children to talk to their companion animals regarding their troubles and to see them as a means for overcoming loneliness (Robin, ten Bensel, Quigley, & Anderson, 1984).

Companion Animals as Family

In the United States, 62 percent of households have a companion animal (American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, 2003). The majority of those with companion animals consider them family. Risley-Curtiss and colleagues, in two different studies on ethnicity and companion animals, found that 97 percent (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006) and 87 percent (Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank, et al., 2006) of participants agreed that their pets are members of their families. The Pew Research Center (2006) found that 85 percent of dog owners and 78 percent of cat owners felt the same way.

Considering companion animals as family members means that they are one of the subsystems within the complex family system and, as such, both influence and are influenced by every other family system (Melson, 2001). Family animal–human interactions can result in such behaviors as companion animals sleeping with family members; sharing family members' food; being confided in and read to, and having their birthdays celebrated. "We often overlook the fact that pets are important not only for children but for every member of the family" (Levinson, 1997, p. 122). Albert and Anderson (1997) found that women talked about how their companion animals raised family morale. Cain (1983) found, in her study of the characteristics of pet relationships in 60 families, that 81 percent felt that their pets were sensitive to the moods of other family members, and some related that when their family was stressed or in conflict, their pet manifested physical symptoms such as loss of appetite and diarrhea. Thus, companion animals may mirror family tensions and critical situations (Levinson, 1997). In a study of 896 military families, Catanzaro (1984) found companion animals to be very important during the temporary absence of a spouse or child, childhood and adolescence, lonely or depressed times, crises such as the illness or death of other family members, or relocation and unemployment. Companion animals can act as stabilizers in these situations because they offer love, affection, and unconditional acceptance. Companion animals also help families learn about certain life experiences such as responsibility, caregiving, and loss and death. Moreover, companion animals may sacrifice their own health or give their lives for family members by "functioning as sentinels of unsafe environmental conditions" (Jalongo, Stanek, & Fennimore, 2004, p. 54).

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Animal Cruelty

Animal cruelty by children or adults is considered to be a very serious, alarming behavior. For children it may well be one of the early manifestations of conduct problems associated with "low empathy and callous disregard" (Dadds, Whiting, & Hawes, 2006) and should be viewed as needing intervention (Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004). In addition, animal cruelty, in some form, is illegal in every state. A substantial body of research suggests a correlation between animal cruelty and antisocial behaviors (see Merz-Perez & Heide, 2004), including oppression and persecution of marginalized subgroups (Adams & Donovan, 1995; Wolf, 2000). Merz-Perez and Heide suggested that cruelty to companion and other animals may be an indicator that individuals are at risk themselves of having violence committed

against them. A number of participants in Merz-Perez and Heide's study of offenders had observed their parents committing abusive acts against the offenders' beloved pets. The pet abuse committed was also cruelty against these offenders in psychological form. In the case of battered women, Adams (1995) described pet abuse as a unique form of emotional battering (see also Faver & Strand, 2007). Women whose pets are threatened, harmed, or killed experience fear for themselves and their animals. They may decide they have to give up their pets to a shelter (where they may be killed) or others to avoid harm. In these cases the women can experience profound grief over the loss of their pets and the relationship with their pets. If the women have children who also experience this loss, then the children suffer this loss with them. In a study by Ascione, Weber, and Wood (1997), 39 children of battered mothers were interviewed: 66.7 percent had witnessed pets being hurt by, among other things, strangulation, poisoning, and shooting. More than half (51.4 percent) said they had protected a pet from a perpetrator.

A link between performing acts of animal cruelty and having observed such acts is also suggested in studies involving animal cruelty and family violence. Ascione et al. (1997) found, in their study of companion animal abuse experiences of abused and nonabused women, that 61.5 percent of the abused women reported their children witnessing pet abuse, in contrast to 3.3 percent of the nonabused women. More than 13 percent of the children who had witnessed such abuse reported that they themselves had hurt a pet by, among other things, throwing, hitting, or stepping on the animal. Similar evidence suggests that for social workers, animal abuse may well be a means of identifying parallel dynamics within the larger family group (Hutton, 1998). Research also supports links between animal, child, and elder abuse. For example, children who have been sexually or physically abused are more likely than nonabused children to abuse animals (Ascione, 2005).

Therapeutic Impact of Companion and Other Animals on Humans

The literature, both professional and popular, is replete with evidence of the positive effects that animals can have on humans—more than can be adequately reviewed here. However, examples include increased length of walking time and significantly lower serum triglycerides (Dembicki & Anderson, 1996). Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank, et al. (2006) found that the women in their study identified receiving friendship, fun, love, comfort, and constancy—either for themselves, their children, or both—and protection from their animal companions. Because of the powerful connections that humans can have with companion animals, animals can also be positive adjuncts in treatment of clients (Fine, 2000; Levinson, 1997).

This positive impact has been recognized as far back as the middle of the 18th century with the planned introduction of pets into the care of people with mental illnesses at "The York Retreat" in England (Levinson, 1997). In 1969 Boris Levinson described, in his seminal book *Pet-oriented Child Psychotherapy*, how companion animals could hasten the development of rapport between therapist and patient, thereby increasing the likelihood of patient motivation, and how the inclusion of animals could be helpful in psychological assessment, psychotherapy, and pet-oriented therapy in residential settings; in working to motivate the exceptional child for learning; and in family therapy (Levinson, 1997). In 1988 Cusack reviewed research on the positive connection between mental health and pets specifically related to depression, stress and anxiety, psychiatric patients, children, adolescents, family, elderly people, people who are physically challenged, and people in prison. At the same time the National Institutes of Health (1988) convened a workshop on the human health benefits of pets. Beck and Glickman (1987) ended the workshop by proposing that all future studies of human health should include the presence or absence of companion animals in humans' lives and, where present, the nature of this relationship as a significant variable.

More recently, Garrity and Stallones (1998) cautiously concluded that benefits from companion animal association occur on the psychological, physical, social, and behavioral levels and are probably both a direct benefit to humans and a protective or buffering factor when humans face life crises. Melson (2001) wrote, "the study of children has been largely 'humancentric,' assuming that only human relationships . . . are consequential for development" (p. 5), yet "the ties that children forge with their pets are often among the most significant bonds of childhood, as deeply affecting as those with parents, sibling, and friends" (p. 16).

Given the importance of the bond between companion animals and humans, the purpose of this study was to explore what social work practitioners

know and are doing in relation to the HCAB. The three major questions guiding the research were as follows: (1) Do social work practitioners have exposure to and knowledge of the HCAB in relation to social work issues (for example, health, family, children)? (2) Are social work practitioners including companion animals in their assessment and treatment of clients? (3) Are social workers receiving professional education and/or training on how to include companion or other animals in their practice?

METHOD

Sampling

A random sample of 5,012 NASW members who identified as clinical–direct practitioners with BSW, MSW, or PhD degrees was drawn from the 2004–2005 NASW membership mailing list. The participants were surveyed by mail between June and December 2005. Eighteen participants were dropped after the second mailing because no mail was being posted to New Orleans following Hurricane Katrina. Three mailings were returned because of incorrect addresses. To increase response rates, a small lottery incentive involving four Amazon.com gift certificates was included. Three survey mailings were completed, with the first and third including a cover letter and hard-copy survey and the second, a postcard reminder (Dillman, 2000). Participants also had the option to complete the survey online using Monkeysurvey.com. The final sample consisted of 1,649 respondents (of 4,991), for a 33 percent response rate.

Measures

The research questions were operationalized as 38 questions designed to obtain information regarding exposure to information on the HCAB and knowledge and integration of the HCAB into social work practice. Content validity was established through a review of the literature and through a review by two international experts in the human–other animal bond field. It was also pilot tested with a group of students.

Exposure to Information/Knowledge of Animal–Human Relations. Two strategies were used to ascertain the level of knowledge participants had about the human–other animal bond. First, participants were asked to rate, on a three-point scale (1 = very little/none, 2 = some, and 3 = a lot), how much they had heard or read about human–other animal relationships. A set of nine topics covered the link between animal abuse and other forms of violence, the positive influence of companion and other animals on various age groups, and treatment of clients who have abused companion and other animals or had experienced the loss of a companion animal. Second, participants were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with five statements (for example, "The elderly are the population least likely to benefit from animals in their lives"). A five-point scale (1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree, 4 = strongly disagree, 5 = don't know) was used to avoid the test anxiety that a simple yes/no response might engender. Categories for exposure were collapsed in the analysis to two: very little/none and some/a lot. Knowledge categories were collapsed to three: strongly agree/agree, strongly disagree/disagree, and don't know. Internal consistency for the nine exposure items was measured using Cronbach's alpha and was an acceptable .82. Internal consistency was not measured for the knowledge questions, as they were intended to measure different concepts, not a single construct.

Inclusion of Companion and Other Animals in Assessment and Treatment. Another series of questions asked if participants ask questions about companion and other animals in their intake assessments (yes/no) and, if so, what kinds of questions (for example, do they have companion animals, has anyone in their family hurt their animals) and whether they include animals in their treatment of clients (yes/no) and, if so, what type of animals and why, and if not, why not. Finally, they were asked whether they treat clients for animal loss or cruelty (yes/no).

Education and Training. Practitioners were asked whether they have any special training in including animals in social work practice (yes/no); if yes, what kind of training; and whether their social work coursework included information on any of the following: animal cruelty and/or abuse, animal-assisted activities/therapy, or the positive effects of animals in people's lives, with each category coded as a dichotomous variable. Participants were also asked if they would like to learn more about the human–animal bond (yes/no).

Demographics. Gender was measured as a dichotomous variable, age in total years, income as current annual income in thousands, and ethnic identify as their "primary" ethnic identity using NASW's mailing list categories. Questions and response categories

on the participants' social work practice (for example, primary work setting, major area of practice, primary work function, client population) replicated those used from NASW membership mailing list.

RESULTS

These data analyses rely on descriptive statistics such as frequencies and means.

Sample Description

Almost 80 percent (n = 1,621) of the participants were female and white (92 percent, n = 1,612), with a mean age of 53 years (SD = 7.8). Mean annual income was $60,393 ($n$ = 1,358, SD = $37,461). Participants had an average of 21 years of post-BSW/MSW experience (SD = 7.9). This sample is similar to that for the 2002 NASW Practice Research Network (PRN) (2003) survey, which found that most NASW regular members were female (79 percent) and white (87 percent), with a median age of 50. This study sample, however, had more years of practice than the mean 16 years for the NASW PRN survey.

In this study sample, 95.7 percent (n = 1,630) had MSWs, 59.3 percent (n = 1,584) practiced in the area of mental health, and 35.3 percent of those stated they work in private practice. The majority of participants (78.1 percent, n = 1,580) identified their primary work function as clinical–direct practice, with 51.9 (n = 1,516) percent serving primarily nonelderly adults and 44.1 percent (n = 1,539) focusing on individual problems.

Exposure to Information on Animals

Participants were asked how much they had heard or read about the link between animal abuse and human violence, the positive influence of companion animals on humans, and treatment of clients who abuse animals and who have experienced the loss of a companion animal. The majority of those responding had read or heard some/a lot about the link between animal and child abuse (78.1 percent), domestic violence (69.8 percent), and criminal behavior (85.2 percent). Even more participants had heard or read some/a lot about the positive impact of animals on adults (97.8 percent), children (92.1 percent), and elderly people (97.9 percent). Most (69.7 percent) had not heard much about treatment of clients who abuse animals but had heard about treatment for loss of a companion animal (71.2 percent).

Knowledge of the Animal–Human Bond

Participants were asked to respond to five statements about humans and nonhuman animals. Two statements were worded to be correct, and three were incorrect. Participants ranked the statements from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Categories were collapsed from five to three (strongly disagree/disgree, agree/strongly agree, don't know). Most participants (84.9 percent) agreed or strongly agreed that "More than half of U.S. households have at least one dog or cat," whereas 15.1 percent did not know the correct response. Over 68 percent did not know the correct response to "One of the two least common fears of children is of animals"; 31.4 percent correctly disagreed. Most participants (83 percent) disagreed correctly that "Bonds with companion animals are simply substitutes for human relationships." Almost 88 percent of participants correctly agreed that "It has been demonstrated that people who repeatedly and intentionally harm animals are more likely to show violence towards people," and 95.3 percent correctly disagreed that "The elderly are the population least likely to benefit from animals in their lives."

Animals in Assessment and Treatment

Two-thirds (n = 1,091) of participants reported that they do not include questions about companion or other animals in their intake assessments. Even fewer reported including animals as part of their interventions in social work practice (23.2 percent, n = 381). Of those who do include questions about nonhuman animals in their assessments, 508 ask if their clients have pets, 145 ask if they have other animals (for example, farm animals), 202 ask if anyone in the family has hurt their animals, and 289 ask about what place the animals have in the client family. The most common responses in the "other" category had to do with loss of a pet (39), who cares for their pets (13), who will care for the pet in case of death or illness (6), and names of pets (8).

Of the 381 who included animals in their interventions, 86 include animal-assisted activities such as visiting elderly people, 143 do animal-assisted therapy (that is, animal is part of treatment plan), and 49 include animals in inpatient residences. The animals most commonly included in participants' practices were dogs (n = 320) and cats (n = 167). However, a broad variety of other animals were also included, such as birds, "pocket pets" (for example, hamsters, rats, guinea pigs), horses, farm animals

(cows, goats, sheep, and so forth), fish, reptiles, and rabbits. Qualitative responses to how participants involved animals in practice included 79 having an animal of their own present in therapy sessions, 26 asking or allowing clients to bring their own animals to sessions, 30 recommending getting a pet to clients, and seven discussing the benefits of pets with clients. Fifty-eight percent of respondents thought the best reason for including other animals in their interventions was because clients care about animals (emotional health); 31.2 percent thought that clients open up more in therapy. The five most common reasons for not including animals in their practice were (1) against agency policy; (2) client allergies; (3) fear of liability fear of an animal hurting a client, or clients' fears of animals; (4) had not thought of doing so, and (5) lacked training. Almost 93.6 percent of those who responded (n = 512) do not treat clients for animal cruelty; 57.7 percent do treat clients for companion animal loss and grief.

Education and Training

The vast majority of the 1,621 who responded (95.7 percent) said that they have not had any special training in including companion or other animals in their practice. Furthermore, 82.2 percent of those who include animals in practice reported having no special training to do so. Almost 63 percent said they had no social work course content regarding animals or did not remember such content. For those who did have course content, 22.4 percent said they had information on animal cruelty/abuse, 25.7 percent on the positive effects of animals on people, and 12.6 percent on animal-assisted activities or therapy. Finally, 79.3 percent said they would like to know more about the human–animal bond.

Limitations

Several limitations are important to consider. First, generalizability may be limited due to a lower response rate than desired, despite using multiple methods. We have no information on why people did not respond or whether nonresponders are significantly different from responders. Nonetheless, the sample demographics appear to be similar to NASW's own, and the sample does not appear to be biased in favor of those most interested in animals, as might be anticipated. There is also some evidence that lower response rates may not harm data quality as much as feared. For example, Keeter, Miller, Kohut, Groves, and Presser (2000) found very few differences in responses between a five-day phone survey with a 36 percent response rate and an eight-week study with a 60.6 percent response rate. Second, the measures of knowledge (exposure to and agreement or disagreement with statements) are proxy measures, not true measures. Concern for "test anxiety" led to not explicitly testing knowledge. The measures used are believed to provide some preliminary indication of how much participants know about different but critical aspects of the HCAB.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although it appears that the participants in this study have some knowledge of both the negative and positive aspects of the HCAB, the vast majority of social work practitioners in this study are not including companion animals in their practice. Especially concerning are the findings that only one-third ask about animals at all in assessment and that only 12 percent of the whole sample (n = 1,649) ask clients about animal cruelty. Many are not including companion animals in their practice because they have not been educated or trained to do so.

An alarming finding is that of those who are including animals in their practice, most are doing so without the necessary training or education. The reasons participants gave for not including animals in practice showed 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. For example, some participants stated that they work in a hospital setting and were concerned about liability. Although these are legitimate concerns, education would inform practitioners of the many hospitals that now have animal-assisted therapy programs (for example, Banner Health Hospital Systems has such programs in most of their hospitals), and one well-known organization, the Delta Society (www.deltasociety.org), includes a $1 million insurance policy in their "pet partners" certification. Thus, these concerns can be overcome, as evidenced by the proliferation of animal-assisted therapy programs throughout the United States, including the Eden Alternative for long-term residential living (www.edenalt.com); Green Chimneys, a residential facility for at-risk

children (www.greenchimneys.org); and equine-assisted therapy (www.eagala.org).

This lack of preparation in human–companion animal relationships suggests that although the social work profession values diversity, it is a "humancentric" or "speciesist" (Wolf, 2000) diversity. A serious consequence of disregarding human–companion animal relationships is that it shortchanges our ability to help our clients. For example, social workers are increasingly providing home-based services as the core of their service provision. This affords them an opportunity to repeatedly interact with companion and other animals in a nonthreatening manner. With appropriate knowledge and training, social work professionals can be in a position to do much to help people enhance their own lives by assisting with their companion animals. They can link clients to low-cost veterinary services and to food banks that provide animal food. They can help families understand the need to spay or neuter their animals and direct them to affordable spay or neuter services. Through budgeting, social workers can even assist individuals (for example, the foster child aging out of the system) and families in deciding whether they can afford a companion animal. They can validate the importance of the nonhuman family member to their client families and maximize their work with those families by drawing on the positive impact such animals can have for family members. Finally, they can identify and treat clients with animal abuse histories. Identifying and treating animal abuse early may help clients avoid related troubles in the future.

Given the ever-growing body of evidence supporting the importance of human–other animal relationships in early identification of potential problems and regarding the potential for companion animals to help individuals and families build resiliency, it is incumbent on the social work profession to join other professions and disciplines in efforts to delve into, and build on this bond. If social work practice 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), then the inclusion of the HCAB is essential. However, for practitioners to include human–companion animal relationships, they need to be informed by research through education and training. The findings of this study suggest that this has not happened. One reason is the lack of social work research on human–companion animal relationships. Previous research shows that companion animals are a part of clients' ecologies; thus, to truly conduct research from an ecological perspective, the presence or absence of companion and other animals must be considered. Hence, a major implication for social work research is the need to expand the lense to include the presence or absence of companion animals, and the nature of those relationships, in research on the well-being and treatment of individuals and families with regard to issues such as oppression, health, social support, and violence. A wealth of valuable information, and for some, a critical aspect of their life is missed, when, for instance, longitudinal studies of families or children do not include any questions on the presence and relationship of animals to the human subjects. In addition, animal-assisted activities and therapy are also being used by some social work practitioners and by many of the agencies within which social workers practice (Fine, 2000). 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.

The findings that most of the participants have received neither education nor training on the HCAB even when including animals in practice and that a majority would like to know more about this bond have implications for social work education and training. Information on the HCAB needs to be integrated into the curriculum at all levels of social work education. 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 and is related to racism (see Risley-Curtiss, Holley, Cruickshank et al., 2006; Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006), sexism and oppression (Adams & Donovan, 1995), homelessness (many homeless people will not go to shelters because they cannot take their pets), economics (44 percent of low-income participants in Risley-Curtiss, Holley, & Wolf, 2006, had companion animals), and health disparities. Simply modeling the inclusion of companion animals in genograms; in ecomapping; 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's, 2006, Instructor's Manual with Test Bank [Perez family case study]), 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. The therapeutic impact that companion and other animals can have for children, families, and the elderly population, as well as such diagnostic information as the typical age that children might begin abusing animals and motivations for doing so, can be easily woven into human behavior or mental health courses (animal abuse is one criterion in conduct disorders). Courses that focus on evidence-based individual and agencywide interventions should also include information on animal-assisted interventions, their efficacy, and their potential usefulness for many different difficulties and age groups. For instance, having animals is especially helpful for the elderly population as a source of social support and as an aid to physical and emotional health. Cherished companion animals can give elderly people a reason to get up in the morning and to "keep living." This same information should be provided through continuing education workshops for postgraduate social workers. These workshops should be planful and repeated to ensure that all practitioners are aware of the importance of companion animals in the lives of clients. Education and training must address the issue through discussion that it does not matter whether practitioners like, dislike, are afraid of, or are even interested in companion animals, they must critically assess the part companion animals may or may not have in their clients' lives and the potential for therapeutic interventions facilitated by companion and other animals. Although some clients may also dislike or fear animals, and attitudes and practices regarding animals may vary by culture, these beliefs and behaviors cannot be determined if practitioners do not ask.

This study indicates that some social workers are including animals in their practices. These numbers need to be greatly expanded because practitioners can significantly improve their client service with a thorough understanding of the impact of companion animals on individuals and families. All practitioners should be asking about the presence of animals in client lives and, if found, about the relationships with such animals. In addition, 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).

The social work profession's global mission is to help people enhance their well-being. Without expanding to include companion animals in social work research, education, and practice, the profession fails to maximize its potential to do so. SW

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Technically, the correct terms for what we commonly call animals is "other animals" or "nonhuman animals" (which is hierarchical), as humans are not separate from animals but are one species of animal. Although the author prefers the term "other animals," the more commonly used terms—"pets" or "companion animals"—have been primarily used. The term "other animals" has been used in reference to farm and wild animals. The author lives with 20 companion animals: 18 cats, one dog, and one horse.

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